Sequential Art Narrative in Education, vol. 2 no. 7

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 7 Article 1

September 2022

The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in Boxers & Saints to Tell a Transnational Tale

David Lucas JR
dalucas0@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Art Education Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Higher Education Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Lucas, David JR (2022) "The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in Boxers & Saints to Tell a Transnational Tale," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 7, Article 1.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss7/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in Boxers & Saints to Tell a Transnational Tale

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgments: Dr. Laura Beadling

This article is available in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss7/1

The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in Boxers & Saints to Tell a Transnational Tale

Gene Luen Yang's career is marked by tales of transnationalism and how they shape identity. His stories epitomize what it means to live in a global community where cultural lines blur, and identity becomes the axis on which his stories so often turn. As an Asian-American cartoonist and writer whose parents are from China and Taiwan, most of Yang's narratives follow characters whose transnational identity is experienced through the juxtaposition of parables that highlight the nuanced differences and similarities between eastern and western culture. This conflict of identity, in its many forms, is the central theme in most of Yang's writings, like his graphic novels *American Born Chinese* and *Shadow Hero*, both an exploration of being Chinese and American. Yang's characters often grapple with their otherness, not feeling at home in either of the juxtaposed cultural experiences. Unsurprisingly, in *The "Asian Invasion": An Interview With Gene Luen Yang,* Yang states that the medium of comics is a home for multiculturalism because of its perception as an "outsider" medium, and comics attract those who feel voiceless. (125) Yang continues exploring otherness and identity with his 2013 epic, *Boxers & Saints* by evoking the liminality of a new kind of stylistic gutter, (the space between panels on a page)—the *textual gutter.*

Yang's historical fiction redefines how we look at the gutter by separating *Boxers & Saints* into two volumes, creating the *textual gutter* a cross-textual technique of using multiple volumes of graphic narrative to amplify the liminal (the internally disruptive and transformative) elements of a story. The *textual gutter*, as this paper defines it, represents a new kind of gutter that is both the physical, and metaphysical space between two or more physical books that evoke and amplifies the power of liminality, or liminal space, "the in-between moments… It is often a

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

period of discomfort, of waiting, and of transformation." (Bunting, para. 1) which ultimately serves to focus in on the transnational themes of the tale. In *Boxers & Saints*, Yang incorporates a variety of stylistic narrative elements on the pages, (use of color and symbolic imagery) that embody the transnational aesthetic found throughout both texts and are amplified by the use of the *textual gutter*. The *textual gutter* Yang has created amplifies the narrative and stylistic choices within the texts and asks the audience to be proactive in their reading of *Boxers & Saints* as they move backward and forward within the chronology of the narrative, inhabiting the liminal space. This gives new, individual meaning to each text, culminating in an experience that challenges the audience to move between books and across cultures. Using the textual gutter as a retroactive lens, Yang is asking the reader to take part in the production of a transnational culture by inhabiting the liminal spaces with which globalization is formed. Understanding the textual gutter in Yang's historical fiction, we can better understand how Yang takes the recursive role of the gutter and subverts it to create a new mode of meaning in our reading of graphic narratives. This paper will attempt to demonstrate how the *textual gutter* amplifies the liminality of the narrative and stylistic choices Yang incorporates, and ultimately, magnifies our understanding of the potent cultural forces at play within *Boxers & Saints.* And, hopefully, this will bring a new understanding of how the graphic narrative can be approached by readers and creators.

Boxers & Saints is a historical fiction set within the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion. *Boxers* follows the story of Little Bao, a boy from Shandong (spelled "Shan-tung" in the text) who becomes a leader of the Boxer Rebellion. The story follows Bao from a village boy to a war hero, tracking the rationales of someone who might be called a terrorist by today's standards. In this text, we see the violent clash of ideologies that cannot cohesively coexist.

Saints follows the story of "Four-Girl," a child from the same village as Bao who

becomes a Catholic, adopts the name "Vibiana," and aspires to the glory of Joan of Arc. Throughout her story, Vibiana rejects her Chinese heritage, which has discarded her as Four-Girl, which also means Death-Girl, and embraces Christianity where her life is given meaning and purpose at the outset of the Boxer Rebellion. While each narrative is compelling in its own right, discussing and understanding the *textual gutter*, and how its presence is actively used to evoke the transformative elements of liminality, gives the reader a further depth of clarity on what is happening in this tale.

To understand the complexity of *Boxers & Saints* and the use of liminality, or liminal space, first, we'll examine the idea of the gutter from the traditional viewpoint of Scott McCloud and how Gene Luen Yang takes this concept and expands it into what this paper will refer to as the *textual gutter***.** Again, the *textual gutter* is a cross-textual technique of using multiple volumes of graphic narrative to amplify the liminal (the internally disruptive and transformative) elements of a story. In comics, the gutter is the space between image panels, the nebulous zone between moments. It can be white space or a black line, but ultimately it serves to compartmentalize and organize, or disorient, the chronology of the narrative. Every time readers move from one image to the next, they cross the gutter. But the gutter does not just serve to break up the images. In fact, according to Scott McCloud in his groundbreaking work *Understanding Comics,* the gutter is the space in which the reader actively performs "closure" by interpreting the part to see the whole. (126) Others have written about the gutter outside of the context of comics. Erick Berlatsky focuses on image frames around paintings as gutters in "Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory." According to Berlatsky, the gutter is the place where the action is evoked between frames, it is a zone in which ideas are created within the reader's mind, evoking liminality. (12) But how does liminality or liminal space is the in-

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

between, the ever-changing, it is a subconscious and conscious place, it is the next step, and in the space of the graphic narrative, it functions entirely within the gutter.

According to Joe Bunting, "Liminality is the in-between moments… It is often a period of discomfort, of waiting, and of transformation." (para. 1) But before metamorphosis can take place, chaos and destruction must occur. Liminality is the space in which the old and the new clash violently, jockeying for the future. Liminality exists between ideas, the axis on which change occurs; it's the nebulous zone in which new ideas illicit transformation. The liminal zone is a space, the instance between ideas, the moment between images, it is the catalyst in which transformation, deconstruction, reformation, and realignment take place. Liminality can, and certainly does in the context of *Boxers & Saints*, facilitate and evoke a coalescence within the subconscious realm, the political (geo, identity, cultural), ideological, and narrative conflicts that manifest within the conscious mind of the reader.

McCloud examines the potency of the gutter as a place of liminality below:

NOW YOU DIE!!
NO! NO!
EEYAA!!
EVERY ACT COMMITTED TO PAPER BY THE COMICS ARTIST IS AIDED AND ABETTED BY A SILENT ACCOMPLICE.
AN EQUAL PARTNER IN CRIME KNOWN AS THE READER.
I MAY HAVE DRAWN AN AXE BEING RAISED IN THIS EXAMPLE, BUT I'M NOT THE ONE WHO LET IT DROP OR DECIDED HOW HARD THE BLOW, OR WHO SCREAMED, OR WHY.
NOW YOU DIE!!
NO! NO!
EEYAA!!
THAT, DEAR READER, WAS YOUR SPECIAL CRIME, EACH OF YOU COMMITTING IT IN YOUR OWN STYLE.
ALL OF YOU PARTICIPATED IN THE MURDER ALL OF YOU HELD THE AXE AND CHOSE YOUR SPOT.
68

From *Understanding Comics*, pg 68

Here, McCloud demonstrates to the reader how closure is used in comics to make the reader both the passive observer *and* the active participant in creating a new moment. He does this by showing the image of the mand raising his ax to kill the other man, and then cutting to the next panel with the onomatopoeia of the scream. Above, McCloud states that within this gutter we are complicit in the death of the man in so far as we actively participate in his destruction through our assumption of the result of the conflict even though we have no visual proof of this. It is here, in the gutter, we the readers become the destroyers and the creators, which makes us active in our reading. This is the gutter and in the gutter, we are also in the realm of liminal space. When readers turn the page, make an assumption, or fill in the blanks, they are becoming the agent of change and liminality. The reader is existing within the gutter. The gutter evokes

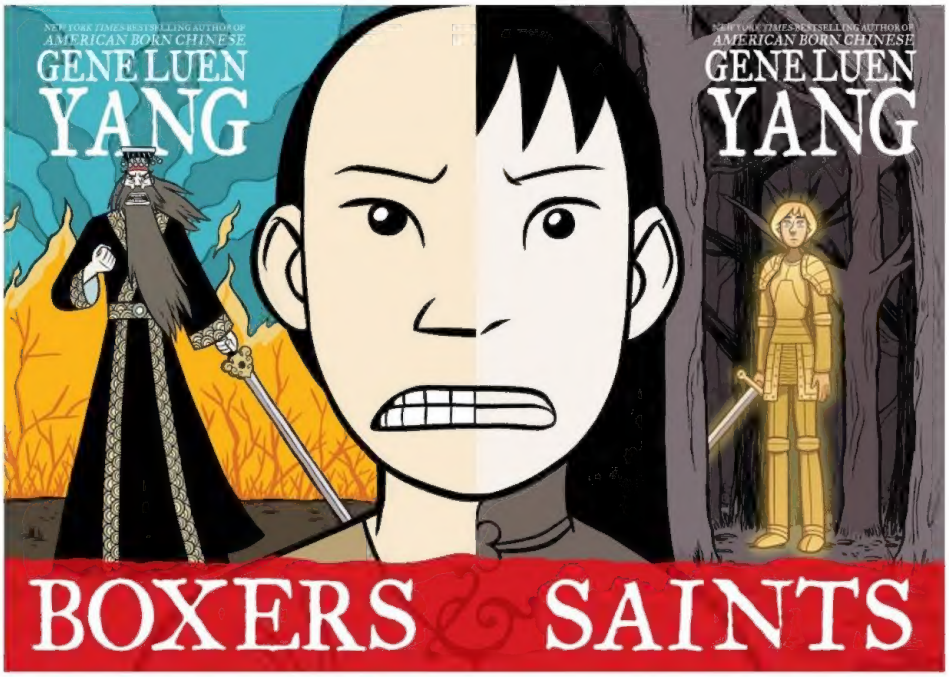
Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

liminality within the reader and asks them to be liminal, to be there and not there, to exist in all places at once, and to be a part of the story in an intimate way by inhabiting the gutter and through this, the reader can inhabit the place of the other, the outsider, someone who exists in a constant state of transition, production and deconstruction, which extends beyond borders of self-identifying realities into other realities.

For example, Paul Jay examines this notion further in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* by suggesting that liminal space is "where cultural production takes place…in both real and imagined borders."(1) This statement rings true in the context of transnational identity and the Boxer Rebellion. Indeed, according to David Carter in, "Nationalism And Revisionism In East Asia.", many of the conflicts between and within nations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were fought among groups who strove to develop and maintain their identities. (178) While that is a broad claim, as it pertains to many conflicts throughout the last 200 years, this potent idea is undeniably at the center of the Boxer Rebellion. Fought from November 1899 to September 1901, the Boxer Rebellion was a war between China's Qing Dynasty, its Boxer rebels, and the Eight-Nation Alliance. The war was fought over anti-Christian and pro-nationalist sentiments in China during the late 19th, and early 20th centuries. By the war's end, over 140,000 people had lost their lives, 100,000 of those civilians. Consequentially, Yang has stated that what drew him to write about the Boxer Rebellion was the fact that it was the first truly transnational war fought over the identity of China. In many ways, it was the precursor to World War I and World War II, as it involved Eastern and Western nations. (Yang 128) Yang has stated that although in America the conflict is mostly overshadowed by the World Wars, in China, the loss of the Boxer Rebellion is considered a part of China's century of humiliation, which has had a lasting influence on China, and its foreign

policy and identity on the global stage. (Yang 128) This is a central element to any transnational tale, the fractured and upended identity.

Indeed, Yang taps into this notion of fractured identity and humiliation and asks the reader to engage with the liminal aspects of transformation within the narrative of *Boxers & Saints* by making use of the *textual gutter*. This is evident from the moment one sees *Boxers* and *Saints* side-by-side:



Here are both books, two halves that make a whole. These images make a statement before the reader dives into the narrative, illustrating the fracture in identity that is at the heart of *Boxers & Saints*. The texts represent the fractured nation and ultimately a fractured cultural consciousness that is splitting itself to formulate a new identity.

By having the texts exist as separate entities rather than one large text with two interwoven narratives, Yang's textual gutter is evoking Scott McCloud and Paul Jay by creating a liminal space in which a new idea, (and in the case of this conflict, a new identity) can be formed. What

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

the textual gutter does here is twofold: it is both the physical representation of a fractured nation, fractured consciousness, and a fractured identity; and it is also operating as a liminal space by allowing the readers to move between books and piece together the internal conflicts shared by both protagonists utilizing the transformative nature of liminal space. In "Liminalities At Work: Chinese Professionals' Immigrant Identity Negotiations." Wu and Buzzanell look at Chinese immigrant workers, and the effects of liminal space,

> "…conceptualizes a position of in-betweenness. It is a state of instability and "betwixt and between" structural positions. Second, it connotes a processual dimension (Beech, 2011). It sees this in-betweenness as a prolonged period during which individuals undergo constant change and sometimes oscillate between identities." (3)

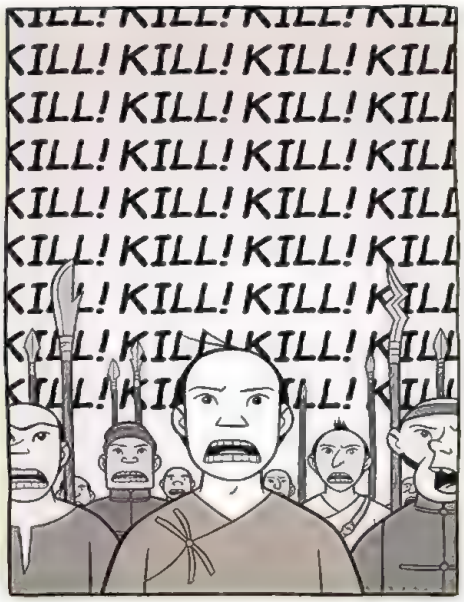
In that context, the textual gutter is evoking McCloudian sentiments, by asking the reader to be active in mending the fractured identity, both literally (when the reader puts the two texts together) and figuratively by moving through the liminal space. If it is within the gutter that the reader connects the dots and creates a new and unified reality, then it is also there that the reader can take part in the creation of new ideas (and by extension, new identities) in a way that the gutter normally does not facilitate on a single page.

Yang's use of the *textual gutter* evokes moments of liminality and forces the audience of *Boxers & Saints* to "connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality." (McCloud 67)Yang's textual gutter creates a fissure, a divide, a new type of gutter that asks the reader to not simply read the texts but to interact with *Boxers &Saints* by physically moving from one text to the next, moving back and forth between both narratives instead of moving through them. So, if the gutter severs the purpose of making the reader a "willing and conscious collaborator," (McCloud 67) then Yang does this with gusto by separating *Boxers &*

Saints into two individual texts.

In some respects, Gene Luen Yang redefines the gutter with his use of liminal space to make the readers collaborators in the establishment of a transnational identity. This is evident when you juxtapose two panels, one from *Boxers* and one from *Saints*:

From *Boxers* pg 224



From *Saints*, pg 159

Above, we see Bao and the Boxers, coming to Peking to destroy the Christian invaders, and in Bao's mind (pg. 224, left), he is the great spirit of the first emperor of China. His identity is no longer his own; he belongs to China. However, the image from *Saints* pg. 132 (right) illustrates what Vibiana sees atop the wall defending Peking: violent terrorists come to kill innocent people. This scene underscores how identity can be magnified by the *textual gutter* and allows the reader to exist within both places, to vacillate between the perspectives of hero and terrorist and inhabit a transformative space from one book to the other, to exist within the physicality of the *textual gutter* and the liminality of this space. This scene is made all the more potent by having them exist across the *textual gutter*, prompting the reader to pause and go back

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

and forth between texts. Ultimately, this forces the reader to be proactive in their understanding of this transnational conflict through the narrative. One must inhabit the liminal space of these texts, and the liminality, destructive and transformative as it is, creates tension and physical juxtaposition of conflicting internal identities. If the Boxer Rebellion was a war for the identity of China, a war that still influences China's identity and foreign policy to this day, then in many respects the Boxer Rebellion was a violent, bloody moment of liminality that Yang's 2013 epic, *Boxers & Saints* explores with precision. However, it bears discussing Yang's use of different visual (symbolic imagery and color scheme) and narrative elements within *Boxers & Saints* and how those elements work in conjunction with the textual gutter and are amplified by subconscious liminality, to engage the reader as they attempt to understand this transnational conflict.

First, we'll examine how narrative functions within *Boxers & Saints* by subverting the tropes of war stories and juxtaposing them in such a way that magnifies the battle for the nation's identity. The story is told from the perspective of two Chinese nationals, and not from two vastly different cultural perspectives. It would have been easy for Yang to make this historical fiction simply about the suffering of the Chinese at the hands of their colonial oppressors - which is certainly at the center of this- but by having two Chinese nationals operating as protagonists, we can see that the battle of ideologies is symptomatic of a civil war over China's identity. Going back to Carter's earlier sentiments about wars being fought over the national identity or a cultural consciousness, we can see that the notion of identity is the centerpiece within both *Boxers* and *Saints*. This is evident in the protagonist of *Saints,* a Chinese national whose life has little meaning as Four-Girl until she accepts Catholicism and is born again as Vibiana. Her new name is a result of her Christianity, which is a manifestation of her transnational identity. Being

both a Chinese national and a member of a religious group of foreign origin is at the heart of her conflict. Indeed all of the turmoil Vibiana faces within *Saints* is not only a crisis of faith but of identity as well, culminating in her martyrdom in defense of her identity.

From *Saints*, pg 161

Hey, let me teach you a prayer
Why should I learn a prayer of the foreign devils?!
Would it kill you to pay attention for just a few minutes?!
Just listen

From *Saints*, pg 159

The above scene takes place at the end of *Saints* when Vibiana encounters Bao for the second time in the epic. Bao is asking Vibiana to renounce her faith, and in return, he will spare her life. Vibiana refuses to give up her new identity (her faith) and Bao kills her. At this moment, the ideological differences only mask the war for identity. Bao's nationalist agenda and his value for a "pure" China are about to violently clash with the identity that Vibiana has adopted from

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

the Christian missionaries. If the soul of China is tainted by Christian influence, then Bao is the violent reaction to that change. Indeed, the violence that Bao perpetrates in this scene harkens back to the violence and chaos that happens within the liminal space McCloud mentions. Vibiana is a martyr for her ideologies, certainly, but the reason Bao kills her is the attempt to reclaim identity. Again, Bao asks Vibiana to renounce her Christian name, to give up her newfound identity; instead, she offers him a prayer:

From *Saints*, pg 160

Yet, the audience sees nothing. There's no dialogue box, just both protagonists and the space. Their prayer is silent on page 160. It is within this silent, empty space that we come back to the liminal elements found in Yang's historical fiction. What Vibiana says isn't as relevant, nor the ideology as important as the need to hold onto her identity, the crucial component of her

story arc. This scene underpins the calamity that occurs within liminal space. By seeing the conflict between both protagonists, one sees the development of a transnational identity. Aside from seeing each other in a brief exchange as children, neither Vibiana nor Bao has had any significant interaction with the other up to this moment. Moreover, they are both situated between two walls in a nondescript place, again evoking the idea of liminality through the visual text's manifestation of a gutter.

In the scene after pg. 160, Bao kills Vibiana. But right before the violence occurs, there is an emptiness, a crossing of ideas, a moment wherein Bao is considering the implications of what would happen if he kills her. The page above demonstrates this. The silence, the hesitation, the moment of calm. Bao is offered the "gift" of Vibiana's prayers, which are no more ideological than they are a manifestation of her new cultural identity imprinting on Bao who later converts (albeit in desperation) to Christianity as shown in the pages below.

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

From *Saints*, pg 167

From *Saints*, pg 168

Later in *Saints*, Bao wakes up among the dead, realizing he's just survived an assault on Peking. He climbs out of a pit of the bodies of his dead compatriots and tries to sneak away until he's accosted by two British officers. In an attempt to save his own life, Bao recites the prayer Vibiana taught him pages before. Here on pages 167 and 168, we see Bao, someone who has claimed to have been fighting the foreign devils, who killed Vibiana because she wouldn't reveal her Chinese name, converting by saying a prayer. Again, the words are unknown to the reader, but he has assumed a new identity and betrayed his ideals in the name of survival. To compound Bao's loss of identity, the reader sees this scene at the end of Saints, which is primarily about Vibiana, whereas the end of Boxers, which is mostly about Bao, ends with him seemingly dead in a pit. It's through this reading and crossing of the textual gutter that readers must juxtapose these two narratives, and inhabit the liminal space that contains all the potent elements that this

narrative explores. The effect and potency of identity as liminality becomes magnified by the *textual gutter* through the use of symbolic imagery.

Yang's use of symbolic imagery serves a dual function in *Boxers & Saints*. First, it operates as a metaphor for the protagonists living in this era of war and change. Second, it serves to tap into the liminality of the reader's subconscious by establishing a new cultural identity that is transnational at its core.

From *Saints*, pg 158

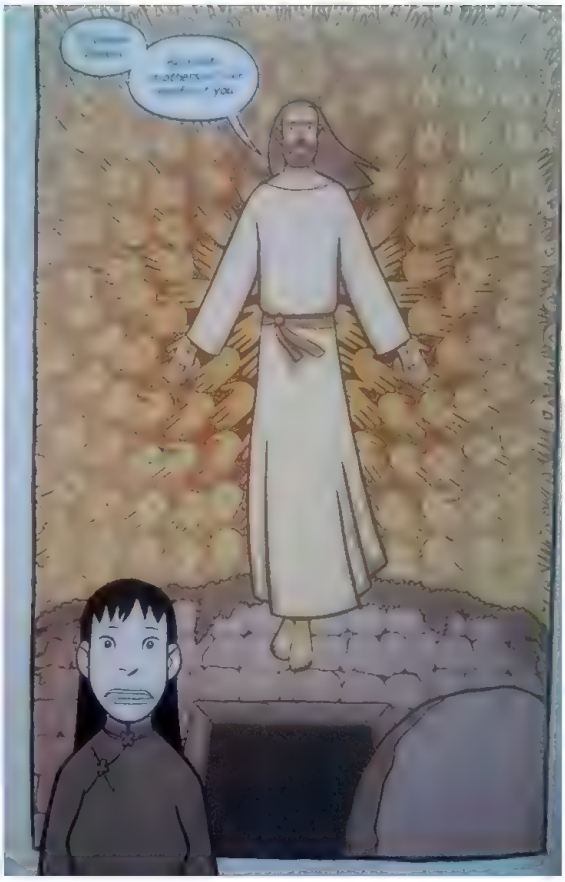
For example, above we see Christ, having just risen from the dead after being martyred, a foreshadowing of what will happen to Vibiana, who eventually dies for Bao's sins. Christ's hands and feet are pierced and bloody, but in place of empty holes are eyes representing the third eye of Taoism. Richard Rhor, a Franciscan friar ordained to priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, states in his book *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics* that the third eye is representative of reason and non-dualistic thinking. (10)

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

From *Saints*, pg 157

By placing the eyes within the violated spaces of Christ's body, Yang has combined recognizable symbols to represent the byproduct of a new cultural identity formed within the liminality of the empty spaces. This creates a powerful sensation within the reader that the dualism of the conflict, of the identity crisis, is pointless. Through death, the destruction of the old, and a fusion of the two conflicting ideologies/identities, a new culture can form, and Vibiana is the possibility of that. Similarly in *Boxers*, Mei-Wen tells Bao the tale of Guan-Ying, the Goddess of compassion. (below, left)

From *Boxers*, pg 282



From *Saints*, pg 158

When juxtaposed, the two images show similarities with the punctured hands containing the third eye. What makes these images so potent is the use of Yang's textual gutter. Each image exists within different texts. The image on the left is from *Boxers* and the image on the right is from *Saints.* These images both inhabit one full page within each text and show how it is through stories and spirituality that new modes of meaning and new identities can be formed. And by having the reader move back and forth between the texts to examine the images which outline the parallels of both protagonists' journeys, we can better understand how Yang's textual gutter forces the reader to be proactive. Yang is asking the reader to stop and go back, to move from *Boxers* to *Saints* and from *Saints* to B*oxers* while paying attention to what makes these images transformative: their meaning is powerful alone in their respective texts, but when juxtaposed

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

together the similarities make the ideas within the narrative transform within the liminality of the *textual gutter.* This transformative and culturally charged juxtaposition is further demonstrated with Lark Pien's use of color.

Finally, to understand how the stylistic elements make *Boxers & Saints* as much a transnational tale as it is historical fiction, we must briefly examine the way the texts are colored, how the use of color is informed by how the narratives are structured, and how those two elements are magnified by the *textual gutter*. The color of *Boxers &Saints*, done over Yang's illustrations by Lark Pien, helps magnify the transnational elements of each story's narrative style. For example, in *Boxers*, Pien's coloring is vibrant. The bombastic and exciting nature of the Opera gods is illustrated through the use of bright colors:

--and once again, the sky is darkened by gods.
Big Brother becomes Guan Yu, the God of War and a Brother of the Peach Blossom Tree Oath
Second Brother--Chang Fei, another Brother of the Peach Blossom Tree Oath

Image from *Boxers, 128*

These images contrast to the muted colors of *Saints*:

I am my mother's fourth daughter, born on the fourth day of the fourth month, and the only one of her children to survive past a year.
When my mother approached her father-in-law for my name, he refused.
Four, after all, is a homonym of "death," and Grandfather had had enough of death.
Eventually, the family took to calling me by my birth order.
Four-Girl! What took so long?! No more dilly-dallying!
Four-Girl.
Yes, Mother.
Death-Girl.

From *Saints*, pg 3

There are also influences from American comics permeating throughout these volumes. Yang stated that *Boxers* is representative of traditional American superhero comics. The colors are vibrant, the scale of the narrative is epic, and action is at the center of Bao's story. Conversely, Saints used dull colors and a more personal narrative style to reflect as Yang called "the bio-comic style," (129) of Vibiana's story. By creating the *textual gutter*, Yang utilized liminal space to facilitate a change in narrative and aesthetic tone that is magnified by the *textual gutter* that divides these two texts. It harkens back to the idea of dual identities and magnifies differences to ultimately subvert them to show a new identity. By making readers collaborators

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

rather than observers, Gene LuenYang evokes liminality within the reader by moving through the gutter. In doing so, he craftily magnifies the potent cultural forces at play within *Boxers & Saints* at a time when the identity of China was at stake.

Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints* is the culmination of transnational artistry which takes the conventions of the gutter and redefines them by splitting the narrative of *Boxers & Saints* into separate texts. Yang's textual gutter doesn't muddle the transnational nature of this story by fracturing it, but rather forces the reader to participate in the schism over China's identity by inhabiting the liminal space through the use of the *textual gutter*. This liminality forces the readers to inhabit those liminal elements of the story more intimately, by creating a tactile experience that forces readers to compare pages, juxtapose images and ideas, then go through and reread with a deeper understanding and commitment to the transformational elements of that liminal space. This can ultimately give readers a greater understanding of a conflict that is largely overshadowed in the annals of American history and forces them to be alive within the narrative, to exist within the liminal space, and to cross cultures. *Boxers & Saints* isn't just asking us to think about two protagonists. It puts us in the position of examining each subjectively with the knowledge we have of the other, rather than simply alternating, the reader is instead asked to hold both in his or her mind's eye and inhabit the liminality of it all.

Works Cited

Berlatsky, Eric. "Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory." *Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2009, p. 162–187. doi:10.1353/nar.0.0021.

Bunting, Joe. "What Is Liminality and Why Does Your Story Need It? - The Write Practice." *The Write Practice*, 2013, thewritepractice.com/liminality-story/.

Carter, David. "Nationalism And Revisionism In East Asia." Contemporary Review 283.1701 (2011): 176-184. Literary Reference Center. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.

Jay, Paul. *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2010.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York, Harper Perennial, 1994.

Min, Wu, and Patrice M. Buzzanell. "Liminalities At Work: Chinese Professionals' Immigrant Identity Negotiations." China Media Research 9.4 (2013): 15-26. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.

Rohr, Richard. *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. New York, Crossroad, 2009.

Yang, Gene Luen., and Lark Pien. *Boxers & Saints*. New York, First Second, 2013.

Yang, Gene Luen et al. "The 'Asian Invasion:' An Interview with Gene Luen Yang." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2014, p. 123–133. doi:10.1353/uni.2014.0010.

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2017

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 7 Article 2

September 2022

Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study

Maribeth Nottingham
Southeastern Oklahoma State University, mnottingham@se.edu

Barbara J. McClanahan
Southeastern Oklahoma State University, bmcclanahan@se.edu

Howard Atkinson
The Kessler School, howard_atkinson@thekesslerschool.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Nottingham, Maribeth; McClanahan, Barbara J.; and Atkinson, Howard (2022) "Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 7, Article 2.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss7/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study

Cover Page Footnote

Author Note Maribeth Nottingham, Educational Instruction and Leadership, Southeastern Oklahoma State University; Barbara J. McClanahan, Educational Instruction and Leadership, Southeastern Oklahoma State University-McCurtain County Campus; Howard Atkinson, Literacy Coach, The Kessler School. No grants or other funding were received to support this research.

This article is available in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss7/2

Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study

Introduction

Although graphic novels are extremely popular among young people, and even many adults, a reticence has been observed among many elementary teachers, both anecdotally and in research, to encourage and support them in the classroom (Cary, 2004; Hudgens, 2022; Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019; Lapp et al., 2012; Laycock, 2019). As elementary teacher educators, the first two authors became aware of the potential of graphic novels and the fact that teachers should be receiving instruction in their use, how to read them, and what graphic novel literature is readily available (Authors, 2018; Cary, 2004; Clark, 2013; Laycock, 2019), but many were not.

To address this need, we first designed a set of strategies, based on research (e.g., Brozo et al., 2014; Cook, 2017; Dallacqua et al., 2015; McCloud, 1993; Monnin, 2013) that we felt could be useful in supporting both teachers and students as they learned to read graphic novels. We then began to include such instruction in preparing our own preservice teachers. Concurrently, we developed a professional development approach based on the system of related strategies to help inservice teachers build their understanding of how to read graphic novels, become aware of the affordances of them, and how they can benefit their students. We presented the strategies in brief to longer scenarios at four separate conferences, observing how the inservice teachers responded. Convinced by this exposure that the strategies could be effective with inservice teachers, we searched for an opportunity to work with them in a more extended way. Our search led us to a reading coach (third author) at a private school where the reading workshop format was used, and we were able to collaborate with him to develop a design-based study to assess the following research question: How successful is the suite of strategies in

supporting teacher confidence and ability to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop format and encourage and support students in reading graphic novels?

Literature review

Definitions of graphic novels vary (Cates, 2020; Hatfield, 2010; McCloud, 1993), but there is no doubt that graphic novels can and should be considered as an extension of the comics phenomenon (cites). As Beaty and Hatfield (2020) state, "This young century has seen comics win major literary prizes, shape the image-making practices of filmmakers and game designers, and inspire a burst of scholarly publications, both journals and books. Comics scholarship is booming . . ." (p. 2). A number of scholars have offered their thinking and support for promoting the inclusion of both the reading and creating comics in classrooms, especially college and secondary classrooms, e.g., Bitz, 2010; Carter, 2015; Hatfield, 2010. Nell (2020), however, makes the point that "comics and childhood are, and long have been, inextricably linked" (p. 127). Thompson (2008) has offered practical suggestions for using comics and graphic novels in the elementary classroom.

Yet, while graphic novels have exploded in popularity among young people and adults over the last 25 years, their adoption by teachers in elementary classrooms has been spotty (Cary, 2004; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Laycock, 2019). When found there, they typically serve a specialized purpose such as supporting struggling readers (e.g., Hughes et al., 2011; Matthews, 2011; Smetena, 2010) and English learners (e.g., Cary, 2004; Danzak, 2011; Krashen, 2004; Park 2016). Some are simply tolerated as an element of classroom choice (Hudgens, 2022). Among the reasons for this is the belief of many educators that graphic novels do not constitute "real" literature and may actually be detrimental to students in some way (Clark, 2013; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Krashen, 2004; Lapp et al., 2012; Laycock, 2019; Monnin, 2010). Perhaps a

corollary of this fact is the failure of many college textbooks for elementary preservice teachers on teaching reading to address graphic novels in any way (Authors, 2018). This lack of inclusion in textbooks suggests strongly that preservice teachers are likely not receiving instruction about graphic novels or how to teach them (Clark, 2013; Laycock, 2019). We are seeing and hearing about many teachers adding graphic novels such as *Dog Man*, *Cat Kid*, or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to their classroom libraries as choice options. However, we are concerned that not all teachers understand the appropriate strategies to use with them and do not use graphic novels in lessons, either to teach about them or enjoy them as literary pieces. We would like to see more whole-group modeling of graphic novel strategies.

Research has suggested that modern graphic novels are not easy for many students to read with sufficient comprehension (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Carter, 2015; Cook, 2017; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016; Meyer & Jimenez, 2017). Components of reading graphic novels that challenge many readers' comprehension include images that require visual literacy strategies, specific graphic novel or comics conventions, and the need to synthesize words and images to construct meaning (Brozo et al., 2014; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Monnin, 2010; Serafini, 2014). In discussing his PIM Pedagogy, Carter (2015) describes more complex challenges. PIM pedagogy includes panel and page analysis (or P) which refers to the basic content of panels and pages and is related to the comics conventions; imagetext (or I), which refers to what Carter calls the "co-scaffolding" of print and image and seems similar to the idea of synthesizing words and images in the construction of meaning; and ideas of multimodality of image study (or M), which involves the five modes identified by the New London Group (1996), specifically, audio, spatial, gestural, visual, and linguistic, and which clearly expands the concept of visual literacy. These findings and theories suggest that teachers need instruction not only in how to read graphic

novels but also how to teach with them (Authors, 2019; Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014; Carter, 2015; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Layock, 2019; Monnin, 2010). Such visual skills are critical for 21st Century literacy, learning, and life (Brozo et al., 2014; Dallacqua et al., 2015; Serafini, 2012, 2014), and much research suggests that learning to read graphic novels can support such development (e.g., Bitz, 2010; Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Brozo et al., 2014; Monnin, 2010; Thompson, 2008).

Thompson (2008) has suggested that reading workshops are ideal places for students to read graphic novels. Reading and writing workshop teaching is not new. Lucy Calkins is one of the original architects of this approach to literacy instruction, and she and her team of staff developers at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University have been honing the craft for over thirty years. (Calkins, 1994; Calkins, 2001; Calkins, 2015; Teachers College Reading & Writing Project, 2014a). The method stems from research that shows that students become better and more engaged readers when their time for independent reading is expanded and students have access to a large classroom library (Allington, 2014; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) along with access to and choice of high-interest materials to read (Allington, 2005; Bass et al., 2008; Worthy & McKool, 1996).

The approach follows a predictable structure:

- Teacher-led strategy mini-lesson (approximately 10 minutes)
- Student independent reading time while the teacher confers individually and pulls small groups (approximately 30 minutes)
- Share time (approximately 5-10 minutes) (Calkins, 2015, p. 25)

Units of Study (UOS) are the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's detailed construction of workshop teaching for both reading and writing (Calkins, 2015). For reading

workshop, UOS are composed of collections of books, both fiction and nonfiction reading units, for the primary, intermediate, and middle school grades. Each unit is meant to be taught and completed in a four- to five-week time-frame. The UOS provides detailed transcripts of how individual teaching sessions *could* go; however, these transcripts are not intended to be scripts to be followed or read verbatim. The UOS also provide an abundance of resources including suggestions for read-alouds and mentor texts for individual units. The units allow for flexibility in teachers' choices for read-alouds and mentor texts.

Aware of the challenges of reading graphic novels through the research noted in this literature review and personal experience, we recognized a need for a specific and systematic set of comprehension strategies for teaching graphic novels at the elementary level that addressed the major components that make graphic novels a difficult read for many. The need for such a system extended to both preservice and inservice elementary teachers. We discovered we were in good company in that other researchers had come to similar opinions (Carter, 2015; Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019; Monnin, 2010; Thompson, 2008) as to the need for a well-designed plan for teaching about graphic novels. Carter's thinking, however, focused on designing coursework for college and secondary students, and Monnin targeted secondary as well, but Jaffe and Hurwich as well as Thompson included elementary students as a focus of their strategies to encourage teachers to incorporate graphic novels in their teaching. Yet, other than published articles and books and some rather isolated efforts to reach elementary teachers (e.g., Bitz 2010; Thompson, 2008), we were aware of no research-based program of strategies being systematically taught or shared generally with inservice or preservice elementary teachers.

In response to this situation, we developed such a system of strategies, which we piloted on our own preservice teachers and with conference participants (Authors, 2019). The specific

comprehension strategies included Yenawine's (2013) Visual Thinking Strategies, the direct teaching of graphic novel conventions (vocabulary) using Landsdown Cards (Lansdown, 1991; Richek, 2005) for practice, and a Double-entry Journal Jigsaw strategy to teach synthesis of images and words. Adequately preparing readers for reading graphic novels requires using the strategies in concert. However, we had not determined how successful or useful the strategies could be in P-12 classroom settings with teachers charged with the teaching of reading/literacy.

As we looked for an opportunity to share the strategies with inservice teachers, we were keenly aware of the drawbacks of the "one-shot" professional development (PD) model. Research shows clearly that a single, short-term PD is generally ineffective (Chin & Benne, 1969; Desimone, 2011; Howey & Vaughan, 1983; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Saunders, 2014; Yoon et al., 2007), so we as researchers planned for extended support and coaching for any participant teachers who agreed to take part (Showers et al., 1987; Yoon et al., 2007). The goal was to build the teachers' confidence for reading and teaching with graphic novels on their own.

Methodology

An opportunity to determine the effectiveness of the strategies arose with Morris Academy (pseudonym), a small private school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. Morris used a school-wide (grades K-5) reading workshop structure based on Teachers College Units of Study (UOS; Calkins, 2015) and was in its third year of workshop-style teaching. Working with school administration and university guidelines, a protocol was developed and approved by all authorities involved (Yin, 2003). A recent research review (Wallner & Barajas, 2020) of comics and graphic novel studies in K-9 settings found that the large majority of such studies are experimental-type studies in which researchers provide an intervention with specific material and document the results. These reviewers suggested a need

for non-experimental studies. The study we conducted at Morris avoided introducing any specific material other than the strategies and focused on teacher responses, not students, as a case study, thus meeting the criteria for non-experimental studies. The case study focused on three teachers as a group as a portion of a design-based framework that included a single case study design (Yin, 2003). The overall study followed design-based research (DBR; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Brown, 1992; Philippakos et al., 2021) in that the initial plan for the study was created in a way to be flexible as interim results and events suggested the need to make adjustments in procedures. This approach seemed reasonable because we were not following an experimental intervention in a clinical situation that required fidelity but were instead setting up a window which was intended to observe how teachers responded to and acted upon new information provided by the university researchers and the coach. Additionally, this study was planned to inform future studies related to the suite of strategies, and it was hoped that it could inform the researchers of important adjustments that could or should be made. According to Hjalmarson et al. (2021), "A fundamental affordance of DBR [Design-based Research] is that it enables researchers to iteratively and flexibly refine an educational intervention to meet a contextually sensitive goal" (p. 24). Additionally, we utilized a confirmatory approach as described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Participants and procedures

Morris includes a small yet diverse group of teachers and students using Teachers College Units of Study (UOS) reading and writing workshop curriculum discussed earlier. In the 2018-2019 school year, they served students in grades K-5. In 2018, the administration allowed us to present a 2-½ hour interactive professional development to the entire school faculty to introduce the strategies prior to the opening of the spring semester. Figure 1 presents a timeline

of the entire intervention, beginning with our earliest thinking about graphic novels. Figure 2 presents the major components of the initial PD. We used read-alouds and a PowerPoint to introduce the concepts of reading graphic novels and the rationale for the strategies. A part of the PowerPoint presentation included an interactive activity that required participants to experience visual learning strategies (Yenawine, 2013), an analysis of images that lays the groundwork for Carter's (2015) imagetext and multimodal concepts. Following that, we led the teachers through an exercise of making Landsdown cards (Lansdown, 1991; Richek, 2005) to build familiarity with graphic novel conventions and vocabulary. Next, we led the group in a double entry journal jigsaw activity intended to provide direct experience with how words and images support each other in graphic novels. Half of the participants were given copies of four pages of a graphic novel with words removed, and the other half received copies of the same pages with the images removed. Each group was to write in their journals what they saw or read on the left and what they thought it meant on the right. After a few minutes, each participant was paired up with someone who had the pages with the words or images they did not have. The participants quickly realized that neither the words nor the images alone provide sufficient information to comprehend the pages. In other words, the two components must be synthesized in order to construct intended meaning. As Carter (2015) suggests, this activity is intended to provide "a light bulb moment and helps students see how print and image can co-scaffold" (p. 5). The workshop closed with a question/answer session, asking whether the participants thought that graphic novels could be incorporated into the reading workshop.

Three teachers who taught third, fourth, and fifth grades were nominated by the school administration to participate in the case study, serving as a convenience sample, to delve more deeply into graphic novels and explore possibilities of using them in their classrooms. The

school had only one section at each of these grade levels, with fifth being the highest grade taught at the school. School administration felt that grades below third would not likely benefit from participating in the case study. The third-grade teacher was Ellen (all names are pseudonyms); she was an African-American female in her second year of teaching. The fourth-grade teacher was Kelly, a Caucasian female with seven years of experience. The most experienced was Janice, the fifth-grade teacher with ten years of experience, also a Caucasian female. Their classes were small as were their rooms, but the rooms themselves were highly personalized. Kelly's room had no desks at all but instead had high round tables and boxes of books. Ellen's room had a single row of tables that made an L-shape around two sides; in the corner opposite the tables was a mattress where Ellen met her students to conduct mini lessons. Janice's room was the most traditional; the students did have desks, but this was also the smallest class.

Morris's reading coach (third author) was a graphic novel aficionado; the shelves in his office were lined with an array of graphic novels. He had agreed to lead these three teachers in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) month-long book study of Monnin's *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts* (2013), which is itself a graphic novel, to build their familiarity and confidence with the genre. All three researchers hoped that they would then be willing to try introducing their students to a graphic novel.

When communication by the coach to the university researchers suggested that the teachers were struggling, the university researchers visited with the teachers in February to provide additional instructional support regarding using traditional reading comprehension strategies in teaching with graphic novels. This was a change in the study protocol; such flexibility in single case studies is supported by Yin (2003) and in design-based research as well

(Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Philippakos et al., 2021). The teachers were surprised to discover that print books and their counterpart graphic novels used the same words; the graphic novel just used fewer of them, compensating for the left-out verbal expressions with images and color. The teachers' surprise at how easy it would be to teach figurative language from a graphic novel was very interesting. They realized that concepts such as onomatopoeia and metaphors can be shown in a single panel in a graphic novel that would take a large number of words in a print text. During the meeting, one researcher presented a story still-life designed (See Figure 3) to demonstrate that the teachers already knew the good reading strategies that they would need to teach graphic novels; they would just need to evaluate what works with each lesson and student and apply them to a different type of format that required synthesizing images with text. The researchers stressed that the teachers did not need to learn a new way to teach reading. Later the coach and teachers incorporated the story still-life in an initial session with third- through fifth-grade students.

As the teachers and coach neared completion of the book study, the coach shared his idea for introducing the students to graphic novels by having all three grades meet together in the library for the mini lessons. This was something of a disruption to the normal schedule, but the teachers agreed they could accommodate it. The coach suggested he conduct the first couple of mini-lessons, and the teachers could take them over as they felt comfortable doing so. The content of the mini lessons was based in large part on the content and activities shared in the initial PD.

Using the coach's plan, the mini lessons began at the end of February. The coach taught the first mini lesson in a short session at the beginning of the day to introduce graphic novels to the students. In a second session later that day, he carried out a visual literacy activity with the

students using the Visual Thinking Strategies (Yenawine, 2013) that the researchers had demonstrated in the PD. A week later, in an early morning whole-group minilesson, the coach introduced a wordless picture book to demonstrate how students can use images to make predictions and clarify understanding. During the remainder of the week, the teachers led discussions in their classrooms to build understanding of utilizing images to determine setting, plot, predicting, inferring, etc. During the PLC before Spring Break, the coach suggested that the teachers work together to plan and present the next group minilesson together. The Monday after Spring Break, the fourth-grade teacher felt confident enough to lead the late morning group minilesson on synthesizing images and words, using the materials and procedures that had been used in the initial PD. A week later, the final group minilesson was taught by the fifth-grade teacher, who began to teach the conventions of graphic novels. Portions of these sessions were videoed.

By the end of the library lessons, all three teachers had decided to use the graphic novel introduced in the minilessons (but not read) to focus on visual comprehension as read-alouds in their classrooms. The teachers also began referring to graphic novels in mini lessons although not specifically teaching on graphic novels in their classes, offering graphic novels as student options for reading, and conferring with students who chose to read graphic novels just as they would with a traditional print text.

In April of 2019, the university researchers visited the school to observe each teacher in her classroom. This was not a surprise visit. The researchers communicated to the teachers beforehand through the coach that they did not want for them to construct a special lesson on graphic novels for the researchers to see. Instead the teachers were encouraged to teach as they would normally teach, with the hope that they would be able to include something related to

graphic novels based on the PD and the PLC. The researchers observed simultaneously in each teacher's classroom. Ellen, the third-grade teacher, was teaching a lesson summarizing from a biography; though not directly related to graphic novels, at least one of the students that she conferred successfully with during the independent reading was reading a graphic novel. Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, used a graphic novel, reading the first several pages of it and doing a think-aloud to teach students how to use details to understand mood and atmosphere in a text. Janice, the fifth-grade teacher, was co-creating anchor charts to help students reading books of fantasy with complex plots; two of the three books she chose as examples were graphic novels. It was interesting to note that all three teachers had developed anchor charts related to reading graphic novels that remained on continuous display in each classroom; in other words, the teachers had begun teaching about graphic novels using the same basic strategies they used with other types of text.

Later in May, the university researchers conducted a focus interview with the three teachers. The coach declined to be present until the very end so as not to influence teachers' responses. During the focus interview, the researchers and teachers sat around a table and informally discussed the teachers' experiences during the semester, using a semi-structured format. Pre-planned questions (Appendix) were used, but the researchers deliberately attempted to create a casual atmosphere to avoid making the teachers feel defensive in discussing their participation in the research. The discussion was recorded and transcribed for analysis to provide additional insight.

Data results and analysis

Data for the study came from four of the six sources of evidence recommended by Yin (2003)—documentation, interviews, direct observations, and participant observations. Data

related to the described events were collected from the email threads between the researchers and the coach as the semester progressed, the coach's contemporaneous journal which he shared with the university researchers, notes on in-person observations of teachers, and video recordings of the teaching of the three teachers which the coach made and shared with the university researchers. After collection, the researchers worked both separately and together to disaggregate the data. The university researchers combed through the data to find related comments in the post-study interview questions, the email threads, and coach's journal as well as videos and observation notes. Next, they met to develop common threads, trends, and themes throughout the narratives. These theme threads and trends were color-coded and sorted into categories in two tables: one for the email threads and coach's journal and a second for the post-intervention interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

The themes that developed from the email threads, coach's journal, videos, and observation notes, which represent the points of view of the university researchers and the coach, are listed below.

- Teacher Responses/Reactions
- Teachers' Teaching Actions

We identified the following themes from the Focus Interview Transcript, which represent the teachers' point of view.

- Teacher Knowledge of Graphic Novels
- Challenges/Issues with Workshop format
- Using Familiar Strategies
- Perceived Student Outcomes
- Benefits of Graphic Novels for Students

We will first discuss the results and analyses of the data that represent the researchers' point of view. We will then discuss the data from the teachers' point of view developed from the focus interview.

Analysis of email threads, coach's journal, videos, and observation notes

During the Spring 2019 semester, the coach and researchers maintained frequent contact via email to discuss planning and any issues that arose throughout the duration of the study. This email thread became part of the data collection and was used to answer the research question regarding the growth of teachers' understanding and confidence in incorporating graphic novels in their classrooms. The coach began keeping an electronic journal, documenting his activities and his perception of teachers' responses. This journal also became data and provided some answers to the research question as to teacher growth related to understanding graphic novels, as well as to how teachers perceived students' responses when they were being taught strategies for reading graphic novels.

Both the email threads and the journal describe the coach's work as he set up a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with the teachers to support them in considering how they could use graphic novels as alternatives to the books already planned in the Teachers College Workshop UOS. They began with a book study using Monnin's (2013) *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts,* meeting in four sessions throughout the months of January, February, and March, with the last two occurring after the library mini lessons had begun.

Teacher Responses/Reactions

The coach reported that at the first session the teachers "were a bit fearful," an observation that surprised him. He recorded in his journal that the fourth-grade teacher stated

that "she's never really read or paid close attention to many [graphic novels]" and was "a bit nervous." He suggested that they read the first three chapters of the Monnin (2013) book and explained that "it's OK . . . that a reader will flip back to previous pages for clarification." He commented in an email to the researchers that "My general impression is that they'll need a bit of hand-holding and encouragement." Not surprisingly, when they met next to discuss the reading, the coach journaled that as he was "asking simple questions about 'who's the main character, who's talking now, what does that panel mean (foreshadowing) etc. . . . the teachers appeared dumbfounded. They realized that they read straight through without flipping back to check for understanding . . . assuming they knew what was going on . . . They agreed to reread for the next time as well as read the next two chapters." After the next PLC session on the Monnin book, the coach commented to the researchers that "I think they have a better understanding of how tough [graphic novels] can be to read properly."

All three researchers initially were optimistic that after the original PD and the book study, the teachers would be ready to start incorporating graphic novels within their unit lessons. Emails and dialogs among the researchers and coach suggested, however, that the teachers were struggling with the confidence to actually use graphic novels on their own. The decision was made for the researchers to visit the school for a grand conversation with the teachers.

After that visit, one researcher stated in an email, "Our sense is that the teachers are completely open to what we want to accomplish but are not comfortable enough yet to present it on their own in their classrooms." All the researchers were basically in agreement with that sentiment, and the coach came up with a solution.

Shortly after the visit, the coach shared his plan in an email: "I've come up with what I think (hope) is a working plan for [graphic novel] reading workshop that involve[s] both

teachers and students. My goal is to get teachers comfortable with [graphic novel] 'talk' and 'conventions' as quickly as possible so that they can become independent [graphic novel] readers who can more seamlessly teach with this format." His plan is summarized in the following points:

- Coach would develop a series of workshop-style mini lesson to better familiarize teachers and students with graphic novels.
- Coach would model first lessons, nudging teachers to begin implementing them on their own.
- As teachers take on more responsibility in their own classrooms, Coach would observe and debrief with them.

All agreed this was a good approach, the coach proceeded to carry it out as described in the Methods section.

As the teachers began to take over the mini lesson presentations in the library, the coach noted in his journal, "The teachers and students are becoming more comfortable with [graphic novels]." Ellen appeared comfortable in conferring with [Student] with the [graphic novel] as the text," indicating both teachers and students were gaining a level of comfort with the format. These data speak to the portion of the research question regarding supporting teacher confidence.

Teachers' Teaching Actions

Toward the end of March, the coach noted in his journal that "I'm getting to the point where the decisions will come from teachers in their own classrooms. The scaffolding is beginning to come down, gradual release, Vygotsky and all that. We'll see how they take to it all." The next day he shared that during a PLC meeting, he "advised all [the teachers] that it was

nearly time for them to start decision-making of using [graphic novels] in the classroom (workshop, read-alouds, conferences) and offered my assistance."

As the library mini lessons came to a close, the coach worked with the teachers to incorporate graphic novels as appropriate into each teacher's weekly written lesson plan prior to teaching, offering them use of his personal library. Some teachers were already thinking about how to incorporate graphic novels in their teaching before the library sessions were completed. For example, while the teachers were still deep in the book study, Ellen, the third-grade teacher, was reading an African folktale graphic novel to make a connection to the Monnin (2013) text. She mentioned to the coach that she thought it "would fit in well with the fairy tale unit that she was presently teaching."

The coach worked, consulting along the way with the researchers, to help the teachers adjust their UOS lesson plans to include graphic novel components. The first week in April, the teachers all agreed to use a very short graphic novel "to tie everything together." The coach reported that Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, began a unit on fantasy and borrowed several graphic novels from the coach as options for student independent reading. The coach commented in his journal, "Normal read-aloud prompts (for any text) will be used for highlighting particular reading skills (monitoring for meaning, envisioning, accumulating the text, predicting, inferring, synthesizing, critiquing), and they will be 'tweaked' for [graphic novel] format." By mid-April, the coach reported that "[t]wo of the three classes, 3rd and 4th grades, presently have students reading [graphic novels] during independent reading time." The results outlined in this section clearly speak to the research question related to how well the teachers were able to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop.

As teachers began planning additional graphic novel mini lessons in their classrooms, the coach supported on the side, helping guide discussions and in conferencing when a teacher worked with individual students per UOS workshop format. The coach video-recorded each teacher conducting a mini-lesson related to graphic novels at least once and shared the videos with researchers. The researchers included the videos along with the in-person observations to provide data to answer the research question regarding the teachers' facility of introducing graphic novels in the reading workshop format.

During the university researcher visit in April, both researchers took copious notes and engaged in several discussions to analyze their notes for common themes. The theme that seemed most pronounced was confidence. We concluded that the teachers had reached a level of confidence in their knowledge of graphic novels to be able to use them in their teaching, to support their students as they engaged with them, and to offer students the choice of graphic novels without pressure to choose one. These observations add additional evidence to answer the research question regarding teacher confidence with the use of graphic novels as well as their ability to support students as they read graphic novels.

Focus interview

The transcription of the interview was analyzed for themes. We will discuss each theme with quotations from the teacher's comments as support.

Teacher knowledge of graphic novels

The researchers asked the teachers if their impressions regarding graphic novels had changed in any way throughout the semester. Though years of teaching experiences ranged from one to ten, their knowledge of graphic novels started out at a similar point. Ellen, the third-grade teacher, answered first saying, "I didn't have any knowledge of graphic novels before." The

other teachers also indicated they had never read a graphic novel before. Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, said, "It has absolutely changed 'cause I didn't know . . . how much was involved in the graphic novels." She went on to share her astonishment at finding that a graphic novel version of a classic traditional novel was "the same exact words, same exact story." Ellen added, "But a different format." Janice, the fifth-grade teacher agreed stating, "I would say definitely mine has changed . . . I had no idea that they were so specific and had so much meaning." Then she added, "I found that it was a little bit easier than I thought." Kelly finished up by saying, "Now that we know more about it, we can do more with it next year." Ellen and Janice agreed. These responses clearly demonstrate that these teachers' understanding of how graphic novels work and how they might plan with them in the future had risen appreciably.

Challenges and issues with workshop format

When we asked the teachers about their impressions of the success of the attempt to incorporate graphic novels into their reading workshop structures, they were open and candid. All of them reported struggling initially with confusion as to how it was going to work. Kelly pointed out that in their teacher editions everything is planned out for them in the UOS, including the books used in the mini lessons. Ellen and Janice agreed, including what page numbers in the books would be used, what handouts were needed. Kelly continued, "[the materials] are already made, so how do I make that connection if I was gonna use a graphic novel in that 'teach' [lesson] unless it's already in there?" One of the researchers probed this concern by asking if they were talking about lesson planning. Janice responded, "Oh, absolutely!" Kelly shared that if the graphic novel were not already in the "teach piece, that's something that would have to be in the [unit] kit, because we can't reinvent the wheel; we teach, and we don't have the plan time." Then she added, "Well, we don't have a lot of graphic novels

here." Later she acknowledged that "if you had just a good grasp on how to teach units of study, then it would be easier to implement a graphic novel into it." Janice added, "Or maybe if we found our graphic novel that is our read-aloud for our unit—if there was one." A bit later Janice said, "We have an extreme weather unit in reading . . . so it would be really neat for them to be able to use a graphic novel as a source. But we just don't have that." This discussion showed clearly how the teachers viewed it as problematic to insert a graphic novel, or probably any different text, into their lessons unless they were already planned in the UOS. They felt the planning time that would be required was too much, especially since they did not seem to feel that there was a large supply of graphic novels to draw on. Since we had visited with the librarian and she had provided us with a long list of graphic novels in the library, this appears to be more a function of the teachers' lack of knowledge of the graphic novels that were in fact available to them.

The teachers returned to their discussion of the trepidation they felt initially. Referring to the overall structure of the effort to encourage reading and teaching with graphic novels, Janice said, "I think just how it was planned at the beginning—it definitely helped that [the coach] loves graphic novels. His enthusiasm definitely kind of propelled us and kept us going throughout the whole thing . . . Had that not been there, I probably would have fizzled out." She went on to describe how she liked the plan for beginning the introduction to graphic novels to the students with the coach leading the initial sessions in the library at the beginning of the week, and the teachers could then build on that in their own classrooms throughout the remainder of the week. She also mentioned the support provided by the librarian. Kelly shared that the structure of the effort "made it individual for us and individual for the kids." These comments suggest that the overall design of the effort was effective but was highly dependent on the work of the coach.

When asked what didn't go well, Kelly complained that she felt "it was kinda thrown at us, in the middle of the year." She said, "We were kinda thinking, well, how are we supposed to do this and our lessons." Ellen indicated she was initially confused. Janice acknowledged that they had been given a "heads-up" and had committed to the study, but it "was stressful for me, that I didn't have the time to pre-plan, sit down, figure it out, scope and sequence of everything." These comments suggest a level of stress researchers had not fully anticipated. A beginning-of-the-year start for the effort would have been more acceptable and less stressful for teachers.

Using familiar strategies

One of the researchers' concerns that prompted the second visit was what was perceived as the teachers' perception that teaching with graphic novels meant learning a whole new way of teaching. Thus, we were pleased to hear comments during the interview such as the following that indicated the teachers had come to understand that the literary attributes and reading strategies they were accustomed to teaching were completely applicable to graphic novels. Janice reported that, in conferencing with her students, "my language didn't change at all . . . I didn't really have to learn any new strategies on how to talk to [the students] about what they were reading—which I found is great!" Kelly agreed; "I didn't have to change," she said. "No, not at all," Ellen chimed in. Then they offered specific examples of what remained the same: character traits, story problem, setting, finding text evidence, context clues, visualization.

Teacher impressions of student responses

One of the interview questions asked whether the teachers were able to perceive any differences in the attitudes of their students toward graphic novels. Ellen stated that she "noticed more of the kids actually slowed down when they were reading in the graphic novels." Janice added that "they're all flipping back now," indicating that she felt they were slowing their

reading by re-reading. The other teachers agreed. Ellen said, "They go back and 'This relates to this,' and 'This is where I noticed this is a different color from this,' and even using the words—some of them saying 'panels' and different [graphic novel-related] words. I was like, Wow! You guys really did take that in!" Kelly commented that she felt one reason for the success with the students was that "the kids' interest in it makes them want to read more." She said, "I have some kids that love to read the graphic novels, so if that relates to what we're doing, that's great."

Kelly also mentioned that "the kids can teach someone else about [graphic novels] now." Janice explained how "their enthusiasm over the past couple weeks, when they would go back and look back at it and be able to talk about what they were inferring and what they were connect[ing], kind of connecting two different parts together, just overhearing that and letting them lead it." Ellen commented on how she felt her students experienced "aha!" moments, when they began to figure out how the authors used color and other graphic novel conventions. When one researcher asked for more clarification as to whether before the study a student might read through a graphic novel quickly without understanding it, Ellen agreed. The researcher asked whether even students who did not particularly like graphic novels would now feel more comfortable if they had to read one. Janice said that "some . . . probably could read them at least a little differently because [of] how we have the anchor charts in our room . . . and we use that language when we can, so they're being at least exposed to it a little bit more." These comments suggest that the teachers perceived that the work done with the students on graphic novels had had a positive impact on many if not most students.

Teacher perceptions of benefits of graphic novels for students

As a part of the conversation related to students, the teachers made other comments that related more to how they observed graphic novels benefitting their students. Kelly indicated that

such things as color in a graphic novel make it easier for some students to pick up on such literary components as mood, something they seem to struggle with during read-alouds. Janice felt that graphic novels made it easier for her students to infer. All the teachers laughed when Kelly said, "They could teach their parents about the panels and everything." The teachers agreed that most of the students were valuing graphic novels in a new way, but as Kelly said, "Not all of them . . . most of them;" some students, she felt, saw little to no benefit to them. Kelly seemed to feel that the biggest impact was "the language that they use . . . they knew the language of graphic novels." So clearly, all the teachers saw that being introduced to graphic novels in a methodical way had been a benefit to most of their students.

Discussion and implications

The data provide much insight into how the teachers responded, learned, changed, and felt benefit from the study. In the focus interview, comments the teachers made as to how pleased they were to discover that they could teach graphic novels using the same comprehension strategies they used with traditional text demonstrated a new-found confidence in teaching with graphic novels. This change in perception is indicative of the overall success of the professional development that utilized the strategies we had designed in terms of teacher growth.

The part of our research question that investigated the situational aspect of the readers workshop was much more complicated. As researchers, we anticipated the challenge that teachers might find graphic novels harder to read than they thought they would be. Indeed, the coach's conversation with the perplexed teachers in trying to discuss the first three chapters of the Monnin (2013) book was a clear indication that our prediction was accurate. Even as the three teachers began to understand how to read graphic novels, it took several weeks for them to

see their way clear to begin to integrate graphic novels into their classrooms. It, in fact, seemed to be harder than all researchers expected.

As Guskey (2003) has pointed out, the context of a professional development can have a strong influence on its results. What the researchers in this case did not truly realize until later was that a large part of the teachers' concerns centered around the UOS of the Teachers College Reading Workshop that they were required to use. Despite the fact that the UOS are intended to be a guide, not a script, it seemed clear in hindsight that the teachers felt that they must stick quite closely to them, or that to deviate from them would take time that they did not feel comfortable investing in something they were not yet familiar with. This helps explain why the coach felt the need to design the first mini lessons for them and conduct them jointly. The fact that the teachers had no UOS guide for what we were asking them to do was a source of major discomfort for them.

The fact that the university researchers were not familiar with the detailed guidance and structure for lessons provided to the teachers by the Teachers College UOS led to assumptions that the individual teachers had more autonomy than the teachers themselves believed they had in practicality. As we focused on the three teachers, we were somewhat puzzled that the coach felt it necessary to do as much "hand-holding" as he seemed to feel the need to do. Once the university researchers understood how dependent the teachers were on the UOS, they realized the teachers felt they had to learn a whole new way of teaching, which led to the second visit by the researchers. As teachers came to understand they were not being asked to make a drastic change in the *way* they taught, they were able to begin simply adapting their familiar reading strategies to accommodate graphic novels with the coach's hands-on support. Thus, the disconnect between what the teachers thought they were expected to do and what the researchers

were actually asking them to do was a challenge. Further insight was provided later by the coach; he suggested that the fact that the UOS constitute a complicated curriculum and these teachers had only been engaged with it for less than three years prior to the study, the teachers may not have developed a level of comfort or familiarity with it to "branch out." Since the study, he reports he has begun to see such personalizing of lessons taking place (personal communication).

Based on comments in the focus interview, the researchers began to understand that the teachers were not quite as onboard with the study as was initially thought. Although the teachers acknowledged that they had agreed to commit to the study in the late fall before it began in the spring, the comments of the teachers suggested a level of resentment. The resentment had to do with beginning the process in the middle of the year, without what they felt they needed in terms of adequate planning time. A beginning-of-the-year start would clearly have supported a higher level of teacher buy-in.

In terms of benefits, evidence from the coach's journal and the email threads strongly suggests that the teachers were engaged with learning about and reading graphic novels and slowly but steadily gaining confidence. By the end of the study, the teachers had gained an adequate level of confidence to teach with and about graphic novels and guide students as they read them, as evidenced in the observations. The teachers credited the patient leadership of the coach as well as the structure of the graphic novel comprehension strategies employed as part of the study as being critical to getting them through it successfully.

After the mini lessons in the library, the teachers began incorporating graphic novels in their individual class lessons, but the library sessions were key, the backbone, to students' learning the structured process of reading graphic novels. They were also key for the teachers as they watched the teaching process modeled by the coach and this supported their moving into a

modeling position in their own classrooms. At the start of this process, it was very clear the teachers themselves had no to very little experience as graphic novel readers and no experience as teachers who utilize graphic novels within their own classrooms. These library modeling sessions were their lifelines.

Although both teachers and researchers struggled with adapting the UOS to incorporate graphic novels, with the help and encouragement of the coach, a way was found. (Interestingly, Teachers College offers a writing institute featuring a component on reading and writing graphic novels (Knight, 2019; Teachers College, 2014b)). By the end of the study, all teachers were teaching about and discussing graphic novels as appropriate and felt confident in conferencing with students who were reading graphic novels. Teachers had come to understand that they can use graphic novels to teach all aspects of literacy and literary elements. They seemed to grasp that teachers can and should include graphic novels as a reasonable option for all students who want to read them for independent reading. We should note that the researchers were hopeful this would allow for more flexibility in regard to the teachers' willingness to add more graphic novels to their units the following year. Sadly, comments of the teachers in the focus interview suggested that would not be the case unless the graphic novel was a part of their UOS. They did not seem invested enough to search them out on their own.

Regarding the research question which asked how successful the suite of strategies was in supporting teacher confidence and ability to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop format and encourage and support students in reading graphic novels, we believe we can say that we encountered expected and unexpected challenges which we were able to overcome to some degree. We feel that the study has provided important support for the effectiveness of the suite of strategies for introducing graphic novels that we hoped for. The

teachers did indeed learn a great deal about graphic novels and became competent readers of them and teachers about them and with them in their reading workshops. The caveat for that is, the teachers required a level of support to carry out the tasks related to introducing graphic novels to their students beyond what we anticipated.

The students themselves were not subjects of this study, but we felt it would be informative of the teachers' outlook to know how they perceived the impact on the students. Comments gleaned from the coach's journal and the focus interview showed that the teachers all felt that most students had benefited from the study of graphic novels. Researchers were pleased to hear the teachers talk about the students really using reading strategies to comprehend a graphic novel story. They noted that the teachers reported they could "see" their own students' thinking through the reading process, going back to re-read and put the pictures and storyline together to aid with interpretation and comprehension.

Teachers did not expect or require students to choose a graphic novel to read, but as they pointed out, many did and were reading them successfully, even teaching their parents about them. In sum, teachers perceived students overall had learned and were benefiting from graphic novels.

Limitations

The setting of the study is, in part, a limitation in that it was a private school not subject to many of the constraints that public schools are. For purposes of the design of this study, the Teachers College UOS as the teachers implemented them comprise a limitation in that this style of reading workshop is somewhat more prescriptive compared to what we typically find in most classrooms (e.g., Miller, 2009). An EdWeek Research Center report (2020) found that only 16% of early childhood reading classrooms used Teachers College UOS. Some might also feel that

having the coach as a participant researcher embedded in the school on a day-to-day basis could compromise the reliability of our results. We feel, however, that this situation actually contributed to the richness of the study in ways that would not have been easy or practicable for the university researchers to do alone and that our data collection and methods of analysis mitigated the concern for reliability.

Conclusion

As researchers, we designed and redesigned the study (Brown, 1992; Philippakos et al., 2021; Yin, 2003) to fit the learning environment and preset curriculum firmly in place within each classroom. This flexibility allowed us to watch the interaction between the teachers and the coach and between the students and the teachers as the learning took place and make adjustments as they seemed warranted. The data analysis provides vital insight into such important conversations. Having the ability to observe the workshop process in one-on-one settings, to hear the questions asked, to see the interactions taking place while being afforded the opportunity to suggest and revise as the process developed, to have emails and journals documenting each stage of the intervention—all of this allowed the professional development to be on-going, not a one-time shot, hit-or-miss opportunity. It became a developing study as the learning took place, and we were able to observe the successes and failures in real time.

As university researchers, we were pleased that the coach and the teachers were able to use most of the comprehension strategies introduced in the PD successfully, adapting them to their specific setting. We were able to determine that this effort to help teachers in a private school learn to appreciate and teach with graphic novels was successful on several levels, in that

teachers learned how to read graphic novels and how to teach with them and that students were perceived to have benefitted. It was also successful in providing answers to questions we did not know to ask. For example, it became clear that the leadership of the reading coach was critical in guiding teachers to a deeper understanding of how to read and appreciate graphic novels. To get the teachers comfortable within the study involved much work and was very time-consuming; without it, the study would simply not have been successful on any level. This supports our contention that ongoing, supported PD is a requirement for success with these strategies.

Despite the challenges that the Teachers College version of reading workshop presented for the teachers who lacked a sense of agency within it, we have concluded that reading workshops may be the most fertile format for both teachers and students to begin to feel comfortable with and acquire a taste for graphic novels. We believe in free choice of independent reading and lots of it; we subscribe to the principles of reading workshop. The format of the reading workshop with its mini lesson, status check, independent reading with conferencing, and sharing offers opportunity for graphic novels to be read, recommended, and shared among class members, meaning that appreciation for graphic novels as a reading option will grow.

This study has given us insight as to how we should redesign future studies as we move into the next iteration of supporting the teaching and reading of graphic novels using our suite of comprehension strategies. Although the private school was very open and willing to support our work, we believe the next study should be done in a public school to be more generalizable. We need to investigate beforehand to understand the level of autonomy teachers have in their own planning and structure the PD accordingly. Since many public schools do not typically have the luxury of a reading coach or one that is as familiar with graphic novels as the coach in this case was, we as university researchers will plan to do the coaching throughout the duration of the

study ourselves. Revisiting teachers after the study to determine any latent or lasting effects would make the study richer, and including school librarians would also add important insight.

So, although this particular episode has come to an end, our tale is not done. We are encouraged that this PD with extended intensive support made a difference in how some teachers and students have come to view graphic novels. As we work to improve our approach, we hope to reach many more future graphic novel readers, both teachers and students.

References

Allington, R. L. (2005, June-July). The other five "pillars" of effective reading instruction. *Reading Today*, 3-5.

Allington, R. L. (2014). How reading volume affects both reading fluency and reading achievement. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 7*(1), 13-26.

Anderson, T., & Shattuck, J. (2012). Designed-based Research: A decade of progress in education research? *Educational Researcher, 41*(1), 16-25.

Authors. (2019).

Authors. (2018).

Bass, J. A., Dasinger, S., Elish-Piper, L., Matthews, M. W., & Risko, V. J. (2008). *A declaration of readers' rights: Renewing our commitment to students.* Pearson.

Beaty, B., & Hatfield, C. (2020). Introduction. In C. Hatfield and B. Beaty (Eds.), *Comics studies: A guidebook* (pp. 1-8). Rutgers University Press.

Bitz, M. (2010). *When commas meet Kryptonite: Classroom lessons from the Comic Book Project.* Teachers College Press.

Boermann-Cornell, W., Kim, J., & Manderino, M. (2017). *Graphic novels in high school and*

middle school classrooms: A disciplinary literacies approach. Rowman & Littlefield.

Brown, A. L. (1992). Design experiments: Theoretical and methodological challenges in creating complex interventions in classroom settings. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences, 2*(2), 141-178.

Brozo, W.G., Moorman, G., & Meyer, C.K. (2014). *Wham! Teaching with graphic novels across the curriculum.* Teachers College Press.

Calkins, L.M. (2015), *A Guide to the Reading Workshop: Intermediate Grades*. Heinemann.

Calkins, L.M. (2001), *The Art of Teaching Reading*. Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc.

Calkins, L.M. (1994). *The art of teaching writing* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Heinemann.

Carter, J. B. (2015). PIM Pedagogy: Toward a loosely unified model for teaching and studying comics and graphic novels. *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education, 2*(1). Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vos2/iss1/4

Cates, I. (2020). The graphic novel. In C. Hatfield and B. Beaty (Eds.), *Comics studies: A guidebook* (pp. 82-94). Rutgers University Press.

Chin, R. & Benne, K. (1969). General strategies for effecting changes in human systems. In W. Benis, K. Benne, & R. Chin (Eds.) *The planning of change* (2nd ed., pp. 32-59). Holt, Rinehart & Winston

Clark, J.S. (2013). "Your credibility could be shot": Preservice teachers' thinking about nonfiction graphic novels, curriculum decision making, and professional acceptance. *The Social Studies, 104*, 38-45. doi:10.1080/00377996.2012.665957

Cook, M.P. (2017). Now I "see": The impact of graphic novels on reading comprehension in high school English classrooms. *Literacy Research & Instruction, 56*, 21-53.

Dallacqua, A.K., Kersten, S., & Rhoads, M. (2015). Using Shaun Tan's work to foster multiliteracies in 21st-Century classrooms. *The Reading Teacher, 69,* 207-217. doi:10.1002/trtr.1395

Danzak, R. L. (2011). Defining identities through multiliteracies: EL teens narrate their immigration experiences as graphic stories. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 55,* 187-196.

Desimone, L. M. (2011). A primer on effective professional development. *Kappan Magazine, 92*(6), 68-71.

EdWeek Research Center. (2020). *Early reading instruction: Results of a national survey.* Author. Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/media/ed%20week%20reading%20instruction%20survey%20report-final%201.24.20.pdf

Guskey, T. R. (2003, June). What makes professional development effective? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 748-750.

Guthrie J.T., & Wigfield A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr *(Eds.), Handbook of Reading Research.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hatfield, C. (2010). Indiscipline, or, the condition of comics studies. *Transatlantica: American Studies Journal*. Retrieved from http://transatlantica.revues.org/4933

Hjalmarson, M. A., Parsons, A. W., Parsons, S. A., & Hutchison, A. C. (2021). Addressing publication challenges in Design-based Research. In Z. A. Philippakos, E. Howell, & A.

Pellegrino (Eds.), *Design-based research in education: Theory and applications* (pp. 23-42). Guilford.

Howey, K., & Vaughan, J. (1983). Current patterns of staff development. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Staff development* (82nd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, pp. 92-117). National Society for the Study of Education

Hughes, J. M., King, A., Perkins, P. & Fuke, V. (2011). Adolescents and "Autographics": Reading and Writing Coming-of-Age Graphic Novels. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*, 601-612.

Hudgens, L. (2022, January 14). Why "As long as they're reading" is a flawed philosophy. *Bored Teachers*. Retrieved from https://boredteachers.com/post/as-long-as-theyre-reading

Jaffe, M., & Hurwich, T. (2019). *Worth a thousand words; Using graphic novels to teach visual and verbal literacy*. Jossey-Bass.

Jimenez, L.M. & Meyer, C.K. (2016). First impressions matter: Navigating graphic novels utilizing linguistic, visual, and spatial resources. *Journal of Literacy Research, 48*, 432-447.

Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading: Insights from the research (2nd ed.)*. Heinemann.

Knight, H. (2019, October 28). TCRWP writing coaching institutes fall 2019. *We are all learning here.* Retrieved from https://teachersh.scis-his.net/hknight/

Lansdown, S. (1991). Increasing vocabulary knowledge using direct instruction, cooperative grouping, and reading in junior high school. *Illinois Reading Council Journal, 19*(4), 15–21.

Lapp, D., Wolsey, T. D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012). Graphic novels: What elementary teachers think about their instructional value. *Journal of Education, 192*(1), 23-35.

Laycock, D. (2019). Pilgrims in a foreign land: Teachers using graphic novels as classroom texts. Scan 38(2). Retrieved from https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/professional-learning/scan/past-issues/vol-38,-2019/pilgrims-in-a-foreign-land-teachers-using-graphic-novels-as-classroom-texts

Matthews, S. A. (2011). Framing Preservice Teachers' Interpretations of Graphic Novels in the Social Studies Classrooms. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 39*, 416-446.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics.* William Morrow.

Meyer, C.K., & Jimenez, L.M. (2017). Using every word and image: Framing graphic novel instruction the Expanded Four Resources Model. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 61*, 153-161. doi: 10.1002/jaal.666

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Miller, D. (2009). *The book whisperer: Awakening the inner reader in every child.* Jossey-Bass.

Monnin, K. (2013). *Teaching reading comprehension with graphic texts: An illustrated adventure.* Maupin House.

Monnin, K. (2010). *Teaching graphic novels: Practical strategies for the secondary ELA classroom.* Maupin House.

Nell, P. (2020). Children and comics. In C. Hatfield and B. Beaty (Eds.), *Comics studies: A guidebook* (pp. 126-136). Rutgers University Press.

New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(1), 60-92.

Park, J. Y. (2016). Going Global and Getting Graphic: Critical Multicultural Citizenship Education in an Afterschool Program for Immigrant and Refugee Girls. *International*

Journal of Multicultural Education, 18(1), 126-141.

Richardson, V., & Placier, P. (2001). Teacher change. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 905-947), American Educational Research Association.

Richek, M.A. (2005). Words are wonderful: Interactive, time-efficient strategies to teach meaning vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher, 58*(5), 414–423. https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.58.5.1

Philippakos, Z. A., Howell, E., & Pellegrino, A. (Eds.) (2021). *Design-based research in education: Theory and applications.* Guilford.

Saunders, R. (2014). Effectiveness of research-based teacher professional development. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 39*(4). http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2014v39n4.10. Retrieved from https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol39/iss4/10

Serafini, F. (2012). Reading multimodal texts in the 21st Century. *Research in the Schools, 19*(1), 26–32.

Serafini, F. (2014). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy.* Teachers College Press.

Showers, B., Joyce, B., & Bennett, B. (1987). Synthesis of research on staff development: A framework for future study and state-of-the-art analysis. *Educational Leadership, 45*(3), 12-16.

Smetana, L. (2010). Graphic Novel Gurus: Students with Learning Disabilities Enjoying Real Literature. *The California Reader, 44*(1), 3-14

Tan, S. (2007). *The arrival.* Arthur A. Levine.

Teachers College Reading & Writing Project. (2014a). *Our History.* Author. Retrieved from

http://readingandwritingproject.org/about/history

Teachers College Reading & Writing Project (2014b). Engaging Readers and Writers with Graphic Novels (and Graphic Nonfiction) Institute: Grades 3-8. Author. Retrieved from https://readingandwritingproject.org/services/institutes/tc-spring-institutes/graphic-novels-and-nonfiction-institute

Thompson, T. (2008). *Adventures in graphica: Using comics and graphic novels to teach comprehension, 2-6.* Stenhouse.

Tompkins, V., Guo, Y., Justice, L. M. (2013). Inference generation, story comprehension, and language skills in the preschool years. *Reading and Writing, 26*, 403-429. doi: 10.1007/s11145-012-9374-7

Wallner, L., & Barajas, K. E. (2020). Using comics and graphic novels in K-9 education: An integrative research review. *Studies in Comics, 11*(1), 37-54 https://doi.org/10.1386/jem_00014_1

Worthy, J., & McKool, S. (1996). Students who say they hate to read: The importance of opportunity, choice, and access. In D. J. Leu, C. K. Kinzer, & K. A. Hinchman (Eds.), *Literacies for the 21st century: Research and practice.* 45th yearbook of the National Reading Conference (pp. 245-256). National Reading Conference.

Yenawine, P. (2013). *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using art to deepen learning across school disciplines.* Harvard Education.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W., Scarloss, B., Shapley, K. L. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affect student achievement.* U.S. Department of Education.

Appendix

Structured Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Has your general impression of graphic novels changed? In what way?
2. What is your impression of the success or lack of it regarding teaching graphic novel strategies in the Reading Workshop?
3. If you see it as generally successful, what do you think is the reason?
4. If you see it as not successful, why?
5. As you taught the strategies over several months, did you see any evidence that the students' feelings about graphic novels changed? If so, how and why?

Figure 1

Timeline of Professional Development Activities

•The researchers begin planning ways to promote graphic novels being used in the classroom. How do we get the word out?
•Began designing a Graphic Novel professional development to present at conferences.
•Presented at the Oklahoma State Reading Conference (September)
•Took PD on the road to Oklahoma Literacy Conference
•Presented PD at Association of Literacy Educators and Researhers
•Presented PD at Texas Association of Literacy Educators
•Presented PD in elementary teacher preparation courses
•Reached out to former doctoral peer, recommended as a graphic novel enthusiast, who was working as an instructional coach at a private school in a large metropolitian area.
January
•January 2019 first professional development with a private school.
•One three-hour PD with entire faculty (See Figure 2 Professional Development Chart for procedures.)
•Focus teachers (3rd, 4th, 5th grade) chosen from the larger group per the principal.
2019
February & March
•Researchers provide copies of Teaching reading comprehension with graphic texts: An illustrated adventure, by K. Monnin (2013) a graphic novel introduction.
•Instructional Coach leads book study beginning in February and continuing into March.
•Researchers return to the school to provide additional PD, "Unpacking your strategies." *Helping the teachers to utilize strategies they already use in literacy. (See Figure 3 Professional Development Chart for procedures.)
•After the book study is completed, the Instructional Coach begins teaching mini-lessons in the library combining 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, as a modeling process designed to encourage teachers to use what they know about reading, but also to alleviate fears about the graphic novel teaching process.
•Teachers begin to take over mini-lessons and utilize graphic novels in their classrooms. Sessions are videoed.
•Researcher observations begin:
•Part one of observations: Instructional Coach provides videos he recorded in library minilessons and in each classroom to researchers.
•Part two of observations: Researchers observe in each classroom as the teacher used a graphic novel in the lesson.
•May- exit interviews and closing discussions

Figure 2

Components of Full Faculty Professional Development

Professional Development: Steps for Introducing Graphic Novels	• Reading the Image – visual reading (Visual Thinking Strategy) • Graphic Novel Conventions and Vocabulary - Landsdown Cards • Double-entry Jigsaw (Content Clues – reading for meaning/ Synthesizing images and text) • Question and Answer session to close

Figure 3

Components of Second Professional Development with Three Focus Teachers

Professional Development add-on: Unpacking your strategies - a dialog of strategies...	• Travel bathroom bag packed with essentials. • Researcher unpacks bag while giving reasons for using each item. • Questions the teachers, "What would you use these items for if they were yours?" • "Does it matter if we agree on the use?" "These are just the strategies I use. You choose your own strategies...those already in your bathroom kit. They are comfortable for you. • You know your students and their needs...the tools you choose are up to you..." • "I will not pack your kit; I don't know what you'll need." "You alone know what to pack!" • "You don't need to learn new strategies. You already have what you need."

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 7 Article 3

November 2022

Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science

James O. Barbre III
Indiana University East, jbarbre@iue.edu

Justin Carroll
Indiana University East, justcarr@indiana.edu

Joshua Tolbert
Indiana University East, jbtolber@iue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Higher Education Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, United States History Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Barbre, James O. III; Carroll, Justin; and Tolbert, Joshua (2022) "Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 7, Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss7/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Abstract

Graphic novels and comics have a rich history and have long served as a medium for both education and entertainment. Although we live in an increasingly technology-rich era which offers abundant visual stimulation to compete with comics, graphic literature is arguably a more immediate and robust resource than ever before. The following paper highlights specific applications of graphic literature to pedagogical purposes, including implications for the use of comics in teaching history, world languages, English as a new language, science, and mathematics. Across these areas, a wide degree of application exists for teachers, in both K-12 and post-secondary settings. In addition, we draw upon the history of comics itself and the relationship between graphic literature and other popular media to demonstrate how the study of comics is itself a powerful lens through which to study history and sharpen skills for critical inquiry that hold utility across academic disciplines. The potential of graphic literature to be both a vehicle for teaching and learning academic content, as well as a topic that is itself worthy of deliberate study, is an essential theme explored by this paper with an emphasis on concrete examples which may be applied to educational practice.

Keywords: graphic novel, pedagogy, critical inquiry, history education, comic book history, History, Literature, ESL, Foreign Language Instruction, Math, Science

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science

Contemporary classrooms are busy places, with a premium placed on time and discernable objectives (Keller-Schneider, 2018). With a limited number of minutes per class and a limited number of classes per week, teachers must make use of every minute. Therefore, the instructional materials for use in classrooms are driven by a number of influences, both internal and external. In this article, we will discuss modern vehicles of curricular delivery across several academic subjects and argue that time and energy spent teaching and learning would be better served and longer lasting with the purposeful incorporation of graphic titles, namely graphic novels and comic literature (Bernadowski et al., 2013). The value of this addition would deepen and expand the literacy experiences of students, thus making learning more rewarding, effective, and long-lasting. We will propose several graphic titles across a range of academic subjects that may serve as a starting point for professional educators.

Modern Vehicles of Current Curricula

Across a range of subjects and grades, textbooks and readers serve as the traditional workhorses. While there are several forms of peripheral materials that often accompany these, the textbook is an institutional inevitability (Barbre, 2018). One of the primary reasons for this comes in the form of an efficient use of space. Textbooks are structured to pack voluminous amounts of summary information into a relatively small space (Behnke, 2016). With textbooks, readers are provided with a canon of essential definitions and fundamental concepts considered essential and in alignment with educational standards (Apple and Christian-Smith, 2017). While this article does not seek to delegitimize textbooks, we will argue that an over-reliance on these forms do not provide the kind of experiential aesthetic that engages students and makes the

memory worthwhile. To the modern student and the ever-expanding presence of social media, visual experiences carry capital, hence an aesthetic experience.

Historical Context

While different iterations of comics have been around since the mid-1800's, they have undergone substantial phases of evolution (Rhoades, 2008). Historically, readers became aware of comics through political cartoons in newspapers and through the comic strips published in newspapers, but this evolved quickly (Eisner, 2008). Sunday comics soon became a fixture with readers, both young and old, as they were designed for mass audience appeal and consumption. Stein, Meyer, and Edlich (2011) observe that "The early comic strips were more than the result of technological and social changes. They also constituted an aesthetic response to these changes and, in turn, also took an active part in the cultural transformations of the time" (p. 511). In the 1930s, when comic literature engaged in wider distribution, teachers viewed this medium opportunistically as a means to engage their students in the intrinsic cultural discourse these works generated or contributed to. Even students with little interest in formally study of the visual arts have found the comic medium to be a viable mode of expression and point of entry for historical exploration (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001). Engaging this medium in classroom settings represented a challenge to the establishment status quo and soon drew condemnation by scholars of the day. In the book *Seduction of the Innocent (1954)*, Frederick Wertham argued that comic literature was incompatible with the goals of education. Amongst others, concerns were expressed that the substitution of literature for this medium would dilute the academic rigor considered appropriate for the day, which included classical literature. Concern was also expressed that the use of this medium would bring about substantially lower cultural norms, and so present a deleterious influence on the youth reading them (Nyberg, 1994).

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

The different genres of comic books during this time used the graphic medium as a unique method of storytelling, beginning with the advent of the superhero comic, but genres of publication were varied and artists dove into forms of storytelling that challenged the norms of the day. Ultimately in 1954, the issue came before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (United States Congress, 1955). With readership in superhero comics beginning to wane, and the rise of crime, horror, and other genres, questions were raised as to the cultural and moral impact these titles would have on a younger generation of Americans. Wertham decried the medium as a contaminated manner of storytelling and argued that they would embed themselves and create new norms for a lower caliber, even arguing that it would lead to misbehavior through mass indoctrination. Several scholars and authors of the day took similar positions and their arguments set a tone of rejection for comic literature as a tool of education, and ultimately, this led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority with a list of provisions for what could and could not be included (Adkinson, 2008). This precedent exercised enormous influence over the content of comics for decades and was slow to lose this influence (Nyberg, 1994).

With the advent of the Comic Code Authority, various series, *Classics Illustrated* and *True Comics* are two examples, sought to fill this market share with adaptations of classic literature into comic book format. In this format, they adapted various works of classic literature into comic book format in an effort to bring this literary high culture to the masses (Jones, 2017). The intent of these titles was to influence popular culture and make the graphic medium more accessible to readers from a variety of backgrounds (Perret, 2004). This included works by Shakespeare alongside *Moby Dick, Davy Crocket, Around the World in 80 Days*, and many more (Jones, 2017). While these graphic titles were and are a part of our cultural history, they still

exemplified a particularized cannon of literature and literacy. Graphic novels and comic literature are built to go beyond the confines of these cannons. While the political motivations of the 1950s and their outcomes carried a larger influence across education, the resilience of teachers and the creative nature of this medium did not stop (Buhle, 2007).

This questionable state of perception was and still is a reflection of the tensions that exist(ed) between teachers and the policies that influence the teaching profession, namely the leadership and opinions of laypersons. While the modern push towards ever-increasing accountability, educational standards, and continuous standardized testing mostly bemoan the professional judgment of teachers, most go into the profession for the purposes of building others up and imbuing them with excitement at the idea of learning and thinking critically.

Strong Potential for a Value-Added Reading Experience

What then, is the potential contribution of a graphic novel or comic book in a given academic subject? Bucher and Manning (2004) argue that, "Graphic novels can contribute to interdisciplinary thematic units or can serve as an introduction to a specific content area. In social studies, they can help students develop an understanding of history and/or an appreciation of differing cultures. In the sciences, they can help adolescents explore complex and sometimes confusing topics. In addition, graphic novels offer subject matter and viewpoints that students might not otherwise consider" (p. 71). Given the initial and increasing complexity of numerous fields of study across a student's academic career, a beginning context is essential in that it must be more than mandatory if it is to capture the student's interest, and so the devotion of their attention. Interest is seldom captured by boiled-down facts and summaries. Students always have more questions, and an effective narrative, especially a visual one, has the potential to capture that (Bernadowski et al., 2013). Gallo and Weiner (2004) offer a better description of their

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

substance: "Graphic novels vary in type, but they may be viewed as long comic books, bound so they might be read like prose books. The books range in length from 48 to 224 pages, and there may be as many as 180 words on a page. Therefore, a 175- page graphic novel might contain approximately 31,500 words" (p. 115). These features, alongside complex forms of storytelling, elevate the potential for immediate interest and impact. Citing these and other strengths, Williams (2008) writes, "Teachers who skillfully use comics and graphic novels in their curriculum present numerous opportunities for students to deconstruct these texts on multiple levels. This layered deconstruction may include examining the story; the creator's intention, characters, and context; as well as the relationship between the design, words, and images. While words, images, layout, and story are all elements in these texts, none dominate the act of "reading." Students are usually comfortable decoding (reading) the visual system of letters and words" (p. 13). Becoming intimately familiar with their academic subjects and the interests of their students, teachers utilize a pragmatic approach and choose a curriculum that engages and motivates learning. This is a feature of learning that does not always fit within a specific recipe, or is a reflection of the generation or two that comes before. This is also representative of the means by which sequential art engage the senses, provided the right framework of support exists. Gluibizzi (2007) goes further in asserting that "Graphic novels and comics push beyond the boundaries of illustrated books to the point where illustrations and text are equivalent, each driving the other, rather than the illustrations supporting or attempting to explain the text" (p. 28).

The adoption of graphic novels and comic literature has exploded in recent memory and one will regularly find school library shelves from elementary through postsecondary stocked with graphic novels (Finley, 2015). The impact of comic literature and graphic novels on

American culture can hardly be refuted (Buhle, 2007). The reader need only review a plethora of movies that have come from their various adaptations. The question that arises from the vantage point of education and teaching must be the potential contribution of these graphic novels toward the learning process of students. "The pedagogy behind graphic instruction is built on the framework of critical literacy. Further, it incorporates the standards and goals of more than one academic subject, namely through the addition of pedagogy in art instruction and inquiry. The academic subject incorporates a tiered framework of instructional resource and support. These tiers are: 1) art theory, aesthetic education and inquiry, 2) critical pedagogy through facilitation of analysis, writing, and reflection, and 3) creation of meaning through assessment" (Barbre &Tolbert, 2021, p. 44).

In the early and formative years of schooling, children's picture books often account for a substantial presence in developing literacies. As time goes on and students edge toward the middle grades, this declines significantly in favor of the standardized textbook. Schumm et al. (1992) also asserted that older students' experience with textbooks are shaped by both the resource itself and the instructional methods utilized by the teacher. One may argue that textbooks represent a more efficient means in the delivery of information, but that argument falls short when compared to the ways that modern readers experience literacy. "Graphic novels and comics in general require a different type of literacy from their readers, a literacy that can incorporate not only written words but also visuals, movement between panels, and different types of transitions. The possibilities for classroom use are limited only by our imaginations, and there is no shortage of excellent works from which to draw" (Letcher, 2008, p. 94). Whether for entertainment or information, readers enjoy graphic depictions of events and this is in keeping

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

with modern media with the likes of YouTube, meme art, and a variety of other visual presentations.

Concepts of literacy have also evolved over time and gone beyond the strict meaning-making associated with reading a text. In a landscape saturated with images, where most work to convey a message of one sort or another, the definition of literacy has been revisited. "Expanded definitions permit scholars and practitioners to refine and improve instruction, such that students learn to construct meaning from a variety of text types, including visual images" (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey, 2011/2012, p. 23). In the context of graphic novels and comic literature, the instructional value for various graphic titles then becomes *does it have merit*? Chute (2008) argues that a "comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn't drawn as by what is: it is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments" (p. 455). Of notable importance are the distinctions between the images represented and the inference required by the student in meaning-making. Bucher and Manning (2004) point out that "...graphic novels actually fuse text and art, which offers value, variety, and a new medium for literacy" (p. 68). Nesmith, Schwarz, Cooper, and Walker (2017) offered the results of a research study incorporating feedback from students and parents on the instructional value of graphic novels and concluded that they offer a valuable potential resource when utilized (Gorlewski and Schmidt, 2011; Hansen, 2012). While students are not meant to experience graphic novels as the 'silver bullet' for learning and engagement, graphic titles offer a powerful pedagogical tool as a part of an educator's repertoire. "Because graphic novels require the reader to make meaning from the structures of sequential art, including visual, spatial, and linguistic cues, they are a form of multimodal text. The reader must use multiple cueing systems to construct the meaning by using the graphic elements, and

instruction cannot simply mimic instruction designed for traditional print texts, which require the reader to primarily focus on the printed word to construct the meaning of the text" (K. Meyer and Jiménez, 2017, p. 153).

Pagliaro (2014) goes further in his analysis of merit by drawing on numerous sources and in offering a set of five rules to establish this standard. Modern instructional choices are driven by a range of criteria and teachers regularly make use of rubrics in their evaluation of student work. While the criterion for each academic subject varies, Pagliaro's rules are general in their nature: 1) Make sure the criterion to be assessed is significant, 2) Make sure the rubric's evaluative criteria can be assessed while reading, 3) Employ as few evaluative criteria as possible, 4) Provide a succinct label for each evaluative criterion, and 5) Match the length of your rubric to your own tolerance for detail (p. 38). The development and use of these rules provides a valuable tool for teachers who desire to utilize this medium for a variety of valid instructional ends. Whether they utilize a body of educational standards, as in K-12 settings, or program objectives and outcomes at the postsecondary level, a structured approach in evaluation will provide the necessary 'cover', so that these instructional choices do not appear arbitrary or ill-conceived.

Applied Use of Graphic Novels

In this section, we will discuss examples of several graphic novels with direct application to the classroom setting. While the mainstay of our focus is toward the use of graphic novels in history, social studies, and the use of analysis of popular culture, readers should be reminded that most graphic titles have numerous applications across a range of different academic subjects, and so should be regarded as such. This feature, coupled with the creativity and professional judgment of the teacher will reveal their own uses.

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

Social Studies and History

Perhaps the area with the greatest focus on textbooks, social studies is highly canonized and concentrates mostly on the distillation of essential concepts and facts, rather than the chain of human events that brought them about. As a result, students are often left with the mandatory nature of remembering disembodied sets of facts. While there may be arguments against this position, we have found that history can be studied and understood as possessing strands and threads that connect to different bodies of information and experience; an essential component for historical understanding. It also has the potential to be presented in reductionist terms for the sake of space and convenience.

A recent multi-lingual study conducted in October 2020 by the American Historical Association (AHA) discovered that nearly 66% of the American adults it surveyed defined History as "names, dates, and other facts about what happened in the past" (Burkholder and Shaffer, 2021, p. 9). This sentiment, the study argues, reflects "a simplistic understanding of the past, one that is at odds with that of practicing historians" and points towards "an education system that often reinforces simplicity" (p. 13). In elementary and secondary schools, social studies and history courses rely on textbooks that are often highly canonized and concentrate mainly on distilling essential concepts and facts at the expense of approaches that foster "historical thinking" or "history-as-inquiry." Instead of leaving classrooms with a clear sense that History is a craft that relies on analysis, debate, and interpretation to construct meaningful, complex, and evolving narratives of the past, students are presented with the stultifying, disheartening, and mandatory nature of remembering disembodied sets of facts for some abstract purpose. Far from being discouraging, this data reflects a real opportunity for educators, professors, and scholars to rethink their approaches and incorporate new ways of thinking about

the past into their classrooms. Comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can play an essential role in these renewed pedagogical efforts.

Building off Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* insights, historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery suggest educators should target their efforts on fostering the essence of historical thinking by focusing on what they call the 5 c's: change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity (Wineburg, 2001). They argue that "these concepts offer a fluid tool for engaging historical thought at multiple levels" but caution that these concepts should not be considered a "checklist" but rather serve as habits of mind when approaching and contemplating the past (Andrews and Burke, 2007). In discussing the potential uses of comics, sequential art, and graphic novels in the classroom, it is helpful to employ these concepts to highlight the medium's probative value and explore what it presents to the ongoing process of learning. Far from fluff or popular culture ephemera, comics can serve as intense sites of historical contemplation and analysis that can have life-long meaning (Buhle, 2007).

First and foremost, given their long and extensive history in the United States, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels are fundamentally primary sources that offer valuable interpretive windows in a complicated past. This medium evolved out the late nineteenth century in an era of cheap mass printing, competition between a free press, and widespread literacy within an increasingly democratic educational system (Meyer, 2012). Comics became a hallmark of American popular culture in the early twentieth century with the rise of superhero comics, for example, Batman, Superman, and later, Spiderman, and numerous others (Wright, 2003). The medium became so ubiquitous that, in the 1950s, fears about their "corrupting influence," particularly the horror and sci-fi comics of E.C., spawned an intense backlash and era of self-censorship (Hajdu, 2009). Far from destroying the medium, these developments created

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

an alternative comic scene deeply connected to the counter-cultural impulses of the 1960s and 1970s as typified by the works of Robert Crumb, Trina Robbins, Spain Rodriquez, and numerous others (Wright, 2003). By the 1980s and 1990s, traditional comics boomed and busted as overproduction for collector markets created an unsustainable bubble, and competition from new forms of entertainment pulled public interest elsewhere (2003). Nearly a century after their widespread introduction in American newspapers, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels exist in a strange paradox; they are now considered a legitimate and dynamic form of art deserving in-depth study and critical appraisal, but they are no longer preeminent culturally outside of the superhero movies they fostered. This long history of comics can provide wonderful and compelling primary sources into different aspects of American history.

Speaking of E.C. in the context of primary sources, in 2014, publisher Fantagraphics released a collection entitled *Judgment Day and Other Stories* (Orlando, Feldstein, Oleck, Bradbury and Binder, 2014). It features a reprint from 1953's *Weird Fantasy* #18 by Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando entitled "Judgment Day." The comic tells a story of an astronaut who travels to a planet run by robots; he is there to decide whether to invite this planet to join the enlightened Galactic Republic. However, the astronaut quickly discovers that the robot society is deeply segregated based on the random color of their outer metal "shell"; he denies them membership but promises his robot guide hope: "For a while, on Earth," the astronaut explains, "it looked like there was no hope! But when humanity on earth learned to live together, real progress first began. The Universe was suddenly ours" (Orlando et al. p. 35). Later, back in space, the astronaut pulls off his helmet, and the reader sees the face of an African-American man. Published a year before Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, "Judgment Day" controversially placed its predominantly young, white male audience into a position where they

identified with an African American protagonist during a period of intense racial tension and strife in the United States. In fact, this comic was the last classic era comics published by E.C. due to the backlash caused by Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, Congressional hearings, and the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (Wertham, 1954).

This comic, relatively quaint by modern standards, is a fascinating primary source that allows students to engage historical concepts quickly and deeply like change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity. It asks them to consider how American society, as an example, has evolved from the 1950s to the present, and it complicates the popular conception of the era as a "golden age" in American History. In fact, many comics from E.C. in the 1940s and 1950s, while certainly bloody, gory, and over the top, offer profound insight into the social, cultural, political, and gender expectations of this period of U.S. history that can serve as counterpoints to other period primary sources like the T.V. series *Ozzie & Harriet* (1952 - 1966).

Numerous comics, sequential art, and graphic novel primary sources abound and bolster any history or social studies classroom. *Journey into Mohawk Country*, illustrated by George O'Conner, turns the early seventeenth century journals of H.M. Van den Bogaert, a Dutch explorer that sojourned among the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, into a compelling comic exploration of cross-cultural encounter (O'Connor and Borgaert, 2006). Alternatively, educators could employ the excellent graphic adaptations of the *United States Constitution* and *The Gettysburg Address* produced by Jonathan Hennessey and Aaron McConnell (Hennessey and McConnel, 2013). These works contextualize and interpret these foundational American primary sources and employ wonderfully detailed and gripping illustrations and examples without sacrificing engaging narratives. Finally, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, an autobiographical account of her early life and coming of age during the Iranian Revolution,

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

offers a compelling, complicating, and deeply personal account of a historical event that continues to shape American life but also receives little critical consideration in the classroom (Sartrapi, 2007).

Secondly, beyond their potential use and value as primary sources, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels offer students new ways of thinking about the 5 c's and highlight the constructed nature of historical accounts. Students often struggle to distinguish between "the past" and "history" as concepts and tend to conflate historical monographs as stand-ins for the past itself. These struggles usually arise from the uncritical use of textbooks and the degree to which textbooks "give" and students "receive" history. Textbooks, just like historical monographs, are interpretative accounts of the past and why it matters. These accounts are conceived, crafted, and edited by historians and publishers, and while they try, to the best of their ability, to cover the gamut of relevant experience, they, by necessity, cannot. Because of the nature of monographs, evidence of their construction is often hidden, subsumed, or swept into footnotes in service of the narrative. It's rare for students to glimpse the inner workings of history.

However, the nature of the comic medium often makes the implicit aspects of historical monographs or textbooks explicit through drawn imagery, dialogue, thought bubbles, and captions (Eisner, 2008; McCloud, 2006). In other words, comics can easily broadcast to readers the complex interplay between the past, the voices of past actors, and the voices of historians crafting past narratives. In a comic panel, the author and artist can show a conversation between two historical actors, and then with captions, offer critical context and commentary. At a glance, the reader can quickly parse the various voices at play in constructing this vignette. Likewise, comic panels, in terms of varying scale and size, can capture the beautiful ways historians in

their narratives jump across, distort, and expend time and space (Gaddis, 2002). It is not uncommon for historians to talk about significant global developments through quotidian examples and do so in a single written paragraph. Comics help make historical techniques demonstrable. They can help students demystify the skills, processes, and thinking and writing required by historical thinking.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, the first and only graphic novel so far to do so, offers students a great example of how comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can highlight, clarify, and leverage the interplay between the past, the present, and how historical narratives shape and mediate both (Spiegelman, 1996). *Maus* tells the story of Spiegelman's father, Vladek, who survived World War II, the Holocaust, the death of his first son, and later the suicide of his wife after emigrating to the United States. In peace, Vladek continued enacting the same behaviors and dispositions that allowed him to survive the violence and destruction of the 1930s and 1940s, hoarding, miserliness, suspicion, and paranoia. The reader witnesses and explores how Art's father and mother's trauma shaped him through the narrative. Despite never experiencing these horrors, Art bore the weight. *Maus* is an equally profound narrative that captures the fraught relationship between father and son in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Spiegelman employed the medium of comics, which in the late 1970s America were often considered adolescent or childish, and undoubtedly unbecoming for a serious topic like the Holocaust (Rothberg, 1994). By employing the language of this medium, cartoonish depictions of Jews, Germans, and Poles as mice, cats, and pigs, Spiegelman both literalizes and in the process of doing so renders the "racial categorization" and Nazi propaganda that underwrote the Holocaust as constructed, suspect, and absurd (De Angelis, 2005). Throughout *Maus*,

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

Spiegelman drives these "racial categorizations" to their absurd conclusions; characters start wearing pig masks to pass as Polish, Spiegelman struggles to draw his wife, Francois Mouly, a French artist, editor, designer, and colorist, as a mouse or a frog, and later, during a scene with his therapist, both Spiegelman, and the doctor wear mouse masks. Beyond History, in a world where racist ideas persist and resurge, particularly in memes and other visual media, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels can help students develop the critical analytic tools to parse these fraught aspects of our discourse. Given *Maus*'s recent Tennessee school board ban and the resultant controversy in early 2022, conversations are increasingly vital.

Moreover, as much as *Maus* is a story about the Holocaust, it is about how Spiegelman conceptualizes, writes, and makes sense of the past. The reader witnesses Spiegelman perform the work of a historian; he does research, conducts interviews, and transforms his father's story into a coherent, intensely historical detailed account. The reader also witnesses the attendant struggles of being a historian; the frustrations of problematic sources and imperfect memories, the various ways the personal shapes research goals and outcomes, and the responsibility of telling a story truthfully, honestly, and with respect. A poignant moment in *Maus* highlights and crystalizes the tension of being a historian – Art learns that his father burned his mother's diaries after her suicide in the 1970s. It is a shattering moment both as a son and a historian. Art lost his mom, and then he lost her again with the destruction of the diaries. Forever, her story would be mediated through the voices of others. In a fit of rage, he called his father a "murderer." Every historian, at some stage, thinks about what happens when stories are not preserved or remembered or overlooked, and given the ephemeral nature of the past, Spiegelman's reactions feel apt. This moment and others like in *Maus* open great avenues for classroom discussion about

what it means to be a historian and take ownership of the past and the consequences of writing histories.

Beyond *Maus*, Derf Backderf's recently published, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, employs rigorous historical and archival research alongside exceptional artistry and storytelling to capture and humanize one of the most fraught, tragic, and horrific moments in modern United States history (Backderf, 2020). In Backderf's *Kent State*, the narrative builds towards an explosion of violence, one that draws the reader into the story of the participants and allows the reader, on a deeply personal level, to experience the tragedy anew. Much of what makes this narrative work is the imagery, deeply grounded in interviews (past and present), witness reports, and extrusive archival records, which captures and reframes long-familiar imagery in unique and unexpected ways. He takes a well-reported subject from the 60s, and helps the reader see how it shapes and shadows our own fraught moment in time; an essential quality of effective historical writing. Likewise, Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell's graphic novel trilogy, *March*, traces Lewis's early life in Alabama to his March from Selma to Montgomery and the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (Lewis, Aydin, and Powell, 2019). All these comics or graphic novels, and many others not mentioned, use deeply personal stories that connect with the reader in ways that textbooks and historical monographs cannot, and, in doing so, help students experience, examine, and uncover the profound interrelationship between the past, past actors, and how historians craft their narratives.

Today, students are awash in a sea of film, television, video games, YouTube shows, national monuments, memes, myths, and legends that draw upon history and narratives of the past. Beyond primary and secondary sources and the various ways historians construct their past narratives, comics, sequential art, and graphic novels help educators confront the reality that

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

most historical learning occurs outside the academic classroom. As both an aspect of popular culture and a vehicle through which popular culture flows, comics provide students an accessible space to explore, develop, and scaffold the skills and critical insights to appraise the various media they consume daily. Past narratives, assumptions, or expectations often remain ghost-like within these popular culture artifacts and persist in ways that pass from generation to generation. For example, before hearing of Jim Crow or segregation or even becoming aware of the sordid history of race and racial violence in the United States history animated films like Disney's *Dumbo or Looney Tunes Cartoons* caricaturized individuals and groups in ways that reinforced certain societal stereotypes. As such, educators can easily use comic books in the classroom to highlight the complex interplay between history, historical narratives, and their popular cultural articulations and, in doing so, provide students the know-how to contextualize and parse better the media they consume.

In 1998, Frank Miller, one of the most influential comic artists of the 20th century, published an Eisner Award-winning graphic novel entitled *300* (Miller and Varley, 1998). It is an over-the-top and historically suspect retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) during the Second Greco-Persian War. In his narrative, Miller traces King Leonidas and *300* Spartans as they make their way north to waylay and stall the momentum of a massive Persian army led by their Emperor Xerxes. The Spartans held a narrow pass for two days against overwhelming force until a deformed Spartan showed the Persian military an alternative route through the hills. On the third day, the Persians surrounded the Spartans. In the heroic climax of the graphic novel, King Leonidas rejects surrendering to Xerxes, and the Spartans die in a hail of Persian arrows. The graphic novel ends its narrative a year later, as the lone Spartan survivor of Thermopylae

recounts the brave sacrifice of the *300* to the arrayed Spartan army on the eve of the decisive Battle of Platea.

Years later, Miller's work became indelibly stamped on American culture in 2007 with Zach Snyder's intensely violent, stylized, and historically inaccurate film adaptation, *300* (Snyder, 2007). The film broke box office records, and critics excoriated it (Finke, 2007). It became a lightning rod. Between the publication of the graphic novel and the film's release, the United States experienced 9-11, the War in Afghanistan, and the second Iraq War (Hatem, 2003/2004; Freeman, 2006). In this context, US citizens and influential politicians during George W. Bush's administration engaged in a fraught debate about civil liberties, Islamophobia, and the very nature of how democracies wage war (Casselberry, n.d.). The graphic novel and film became fuel for renewed discussions over "the clash of civilizations" and the efficacy of multiculturalism, which persists in various forms in some segments of American society today (Bell, 2002). Meanwhile, *300*, film and comic, filtered into everyday aspects of American life. For example, Michigan State University used numerous lines of dialogue from the movie during Spartan football games, and by 2008, *300* became the grist for a surprisingly successful parody film called *Meet the Spartans*. The graphic novel and film remain popular and often get referenced inside and outside history classrooms across the United States. Despite being inaccurate, *300*, because of the visual mediums of comics and films, has incredible power in shaping how people think about the past and, just as importantly, imagine and conceptualize History.

Miller's *300* and the historical narrative it offers readers create spaces for educators to braid the various strands of historical thinking discussed earlier in this section together with prevalent cultural concerns. This comic helps students see History as more than an abstract

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

pursuit but something fundamental to their daily lives. *300* can anchor discussions about ancient Greece, often through the breach. This strange addition to the narrative highlights, for students, how the past is often used to assert a particular authority or ideology, particularly in contention periods of History, like the late 1990 and early 2000s, as LGBTQ rights were simultaneously under attack and making progress (Stout, 2004). Likewise, Miller and Snyder's presentation of the Persian Empire and its subjects can foster a stimulating discussion about how History can perpetuate the stereotyping of "others." In their work, Xerxes becomes an androgynous, lecherous, and hedonistic representation of a "decadent" East. The Persian military becomes a faceless, expendable, fantastical, and vastly interior order compared to their Spartan counterparts. The graphic novel's applicability to discussions of the American "War on Terror" (2001 – 2021) and the role Muslim-Americans play in American society is self-evident. However, educators can further these discussions by connecting his work to more extensive conversations about "Orientalism" and how, historically, the "West," through art, literature, poetry, and novels, continue to stereotype and marginalize the peoples and cultures emanating from Asia, African and the Middle East (Said, 1979).

However, paired with newer graphic novels exploring ancient Greece, Miller's *300* can serve to highlight the complex and evolving nature of discourse, academic or otherwise, for students. *300*'s narrative ends with a retelling of the heroic sacrifice of the Spartans at Thermopylae. Meanwhile, *Democracy*, a graphic novel by Abraham Kawa and Alecos Papadatos, begins with an anxious Athenian soldier recounting to his fellow citizen-soldiers the origins of their democracy on the eve of the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE during the First Greco-Persian War (Papadatos, Kawa, and Di Donna, 2015). Kawa's and Papadatos' narrative offers a fascinating, albeit semi-fictionalized, discussion of the origins of the preeminent

democracy of the classical world and does in a way that invites an engaged classroom discussion about Spartan and Athenian societies and how we idealize them for good or ill. *Democracy* also helps contextualize Sparta's later actions at Thermopylae. The Spartans shamefully missed Marathon, and the Athenian victory saved the Greek world (Brouwers, n.d.). Moreover, Kieron Gillen, Ryan Kelly, and Jordie Bellaire's *Three* explore the social structures that undergirded Spartan military power by focusing on the helots, or slaves of Laconia and Messenia (Gillen, Kelley, & Bellair, 2014). The narrative explores the decline of Spartan might and authority after the pivotal Battle of Leuctra, which saw the first significant defeat of the entire Spartan army (Brouwers, n.d.). The graphic novel highlights the ugliness and brutality of Spartan society, which can juxtapose the heroics of Miller's *300* for students.

History, when presented as a visual narrative, offers the reader a chance to locate themselves in a unique space. While any reader will always try to reconcile the message with their own imagination and/or experience, a visual representation of historical experience comes closer than a simple reading of any textbook, especially as it relates to the necessity of asking questions.

Literature

Narratives associated with literature focus on developing the meaning-making skills of readers and in developing an appreciation and understanding of the importance of nuance. They go much further in that what students read serves as an exercise in empathy, critical thinking, comprehension, evaluation, understanding story elements, developing understanding for a global community, and many others. Historically, schools have privileged certain texts over others, and this can and does create an unnecessary disconnect between the goals of teaching and the nature of worth created by students (Moeller, 2016).

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

The concept of literacy and its experiential factors have evolved with societal changes and, as a result, students must often reconcile their own preferences and experience with the subject matter offered by the school. While the goals of literature are multifaceted according to grade level, the Common Core Standards describe the culmination of an ability by the student to decode unfamiliar terms, understand and analyze multiple interpretations of a text or source, and comprehend literature (Common Core Standards, Literacy). Graphic novels and comic literature are a natural fit in this arena. Titles too numerous to mention are included in this area, but we will focus on three: *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1980) by Art Spiegelman, *The Odyssey* (2010) originally written by Homer and adapted by Gareth Hinds, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2018) originally written by Harper Lee and adapted by Fred Fordham.

Maus: A Survivor's Tale is familiar to many educators. The graphic narrative developed from a survivor's account of Nazi, Germany presents a completely unique resource for the classroom. While this graphic novel is deceptively simplistic in its illustration style, it abounds with meanings and themes that are multi-layered and complex. Utilizing this title as a resource, teachers have the ability to analyze themes pertaining to history, the ethics of representation, postmodernism, trauma, and generational transmission (Park, 2011). Additionally, *Maus* presents characters and societal roles reflective of the power relationships of the time in which the stories occurred. This depictive element helps to set the tone of the story and provides an understanding of value. Teachers can use this graphic novel across a range of different subjects and assignments, from the evaluative to the reflective and autobiographical. Through this title, a strength lies in the manner by which it may be treated from one academic subject to another.

Gareth Hind's adaptation of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* (2010), presents an opportunity for students to engage in the exercise of translation itself. As any classic work

adapted for modern education must be translated, the differences between the prose edition and the vocabulary of this particular graphic novel present interesting side-by-side analytical opportunities. Additionally, the illustrative style of this particular work is grounded in the world in which it occurred, yet brings a contemporary and familiar feeling in the appearances of numerous characters. By this, we refer to the manner of familiar facial expressions and, as trivial as this may seem, the nature of normalizing, a particular interpretive mindset that is anchored in the present and not in history. While this may seem lacking in crucial importance, these details, working together, incite the imagination of the modern reader towards one of semi-familiarity, leading to greater engagement. Whether it is *The Odyssey*, or any other work considered a classic, aesthetic familiarity represents a value-added component. The graphic component, while essential, is always an accompaniment to the prose. "If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of meaning making, we do not give up the benefits of word-based literacy instruction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies" (Jacobs, 2007, p. 21).

To Kill a Mockingbird, written by Harper Lee, is a traditional fixture across literature courses in both secondary and postsecondary settings. The graphic adaptation of this book, by Fred Fordham, offers a unique manner of reading experience. With the same essential characters and settings, Fordham succeeds in depicting this story in an intelligent and accessible manner. Accessibility is a strength in graphic novels and what this literary work lacks in the omission of certain sections of prose, it retains through illustration. This invitation to analysis and interpretation, then, goes beyond the dialogue and immerses the reader in the aesthetic elements of the story. Richardson (2017) reinforces this by pointing out that, "Graphic novels are more than just stories with pictures; they have engaging illustrations that help readers infer the

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

emotions and motivations of characters as well as more fully understand the twists and turns within the plot" (p. 24).

In order for readers to better understand and appreciate literary forms, they must be challenging. With the addition of graphic representations, especially when they are well done, the reader better understands that narratives are not strictly linear experiences, but involve a circuitous path to the finality of the narrative. Students and readers who may be challenged by the modern structure of novels are easily turned off by the idea of investing the time and energy to understand a particular story, if they do not find it invigorating or inviting. Again, accessibility is key, and this particular adaptation succeeds by inviting readers in. Additionally, modern readers may not be predisposed toward stories set in the past. Modern students often experience a world and media forms that are more complex, and graphic novels have the means to lay bare the essential human factor of the story and make a particular story timeless. Additionally, as argued previously, modern students have grown up in a media-saturated environment. "Today's students have had a childhood filled with the rapid pace and visual stimulation of television and video games, and they therefore seek the same characteristics in their reading materials" (Downey, 2009, p. 183). As this *To Kill a Mockingbird* is considered a 'classic' by modern standards, a graphic format helps to demonstrate why this is the case. As argued by Carter (2007), "The dearth of essays on specific graphic novel titles in NCTE journals and elsewhere suggests that the transformative power of many graphic novels to help adolescents relate to adolescent issues is still relatively unexplored" (p. 50). The use of graphic novels in literature presents several advantages in that the pedagogical impact of study can be longer-lasting for the experience. Through it's use in literature, it also presents the advantage of a complementary experience for students, especially across multiple courses and/or instructors.

While there are several notable titles in this arena of education, we will discuss four. *Persepolis (2003)* by Marjane Satrapi, *They Called Us Enemy (2019),* by George Takei, *Sapiens: A Graphic History Volume 1 (2020), by* Yuval Noah Harrari, David Vandermeulen, and Daniel Casanave, *and American Born Chinese (2006), by* Gene Luan Yang. The strength of graphic titles lie in their depiction of events and the relationships they forged, namely that of marked social change during a specific period of history or context of human experience (Park, 2016). In *Persepolis*, Satrapi expounds on the conflict and events that marked a pivotal chapter in Iranian history. The focus on these events, their causal factors, and the immediate impacts they had on her own life are presented with illustrations which are not overly complex, but succeed in relating a complex story. The banality of life is woven into the story effectively, but Satrapi's story adds situations and elements that highlight issues such as personal freedom. Through this, the reader is able to make crucial inferences that are culturally and contextually situated. "By separating people's experiences in their daily lives from the political stage, this graphic novel negotiates readers' perception and understanding of culture and promotes intercultural competence by re-defining the constructs of Self and Other through a literary text, and the visualization creates impressions which are not so easily conveyed through verbal description" (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 107).

They Called Us Enemy recounts personal experiences during the Japanese internment of World War II. In this work, the reader is shown how shifting political beliefs can have an immediate and profound effect on people's lives. Through this narrative, the reader has an external perspective to the events of this period and the concepts of values, family, forgiveness, and patriotism are made clear. Readers unfamiliar with this period of history are shown and able to infer the necessity of empathy in human relations and the essence of resilience. One may

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

readily argue that empathy and resilience are universal traits, but must remember that they occur within a cultural context. Going so far as the ways in which soldiers are depicted in this work shows the power of the Other (Derrida, 1992), in taking away or diminishing one's humanity. What is the advantage in this? We would argue that these kinds of experiences are among the most deeply rooted, and so create the deepest set of meanings.

Sapiens is a graphic work offering a meta-perspective on human experience. Through these pages, the reader is shown overarching, but overlapping truths in human history. The advantage of this title lies in the similarity of experience it continuously demonstrates. it shows, alongside the distinctive forms of experience. A strength in this work lies in repeated examples and illustrations of experience that shape the collective perspective of individuals and populations. Through this, readers are able to construct crucial inferences about the evolution of social groups and life in general. The strength of graphic similarities along so many lines helps to draw on what may be termed common experiences. In this, readers learning language also develop cultural understandings, both contextually bound and not.

American Born Chinese is a story that presents the experiences of being the minority in an unfamiliar setting. Deftly exploring stereotypes, identity, and prejudice, Yang creates a space where children and young adults have the opportunity to explore themselves and their own identities. In circumstances where there are no familiar faces and a lack of others to readily connect with, the examples of identity development and confirmation become essential story themes. The experience of prejudice is one that often presents a profoundly influential force, and the ability of a younger reader to relate to this provides a sense of legitimacy for who they are and what they have to contribute. Reviewing the themes of identity, prejudice, conflict, change

and the effects they have on younger people is essential, especially if they are unfamiliar with cultural contexts and the unwritten rules that often accompany cross-cultural relationships.

In utilizing graphic novels to achieve instructional ends in these areas of study, the teacher or instructor has the option of focusing the study such materials in as broad a manner as they see fit, thus challenging students with learning and applicability. A strength in this approach lies in the commonality of experience shared by students with respect to their visual environment and the transferability of this experience to The constructs of language.

Science and Mathematics

Logicomix (2008) written by Apostolos Doxiadis and Christos Papadimitriou represents a semi-autobiographical account of Bertrand Russell. Among the many strengths of this work are an in-depth examination of his work and collaborations across mathematics that redefined the field. In this, the reader is introduced to the beginnings of important questions and observations that take them in numerous directions. Additionally, notable figures in the fields of mathematics and logic serve to offer a path to further study. The intertwining of history, logic, and mathematics set during several periods of history also provides a sense of continuity for a much larger narrative and of larger fields with their overlapping contributions to the present day. While some of these historical figures are only briefly mentioned, their contributions are effectively embedded across a narrative for younger readers.

As numerous subjects of both math and science are irrevocably tied to particular grade levels, and even particular schools, a graphic work such as this provides the important feature of beginning accessibility for young readers. The appropriate evaluation of certain graphic novels and their uses in subjects like science always falls to the professional judgment of the teacher for relevance and applicability, but the development of criteria helps. Whether these are program or

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

grade level outcomes or educational standards, matters little. Nesmith, Cooper, and Schwarz (2011) remind us of the instructional and curricular attention given to this arena of schooling. "Schiro (1997) constructed an evaluation instrument for the evaluation of mathematics-focused literature, and this instrument was later revised by Hunsader (2004). While Schiro's instrument consisted of 11 mathematics criteria and 11 literary criteria, Hunsader's adaptations reduced this to 6 mathematics criteria and 6 literary criteria. Hunsader's mathematics-evaluation criteria include (1) content accuracy; (2) content visibility; (3) developmental appropriateness of content for the book's stated audience; (4) facilitation of the reader's involvement in, use of, and transfer of the content; (5) complement between the story and the mathematics in the story; and (6) resources required for the reader to obtain the maximum benefits of the literature. Specific literary criteria within the Hunsader instrument include (1) plot/character development, (2) vivid and interesting writing style, (3) relevancy and appeal of illustrations, (4) developmental appropriateness of readability and interest level for the book's stated audience, (5) complement between the book's plot, style, and illustrations, and (6) presentation of positive ethical and cultural values" (p. 3).

Conclusion

As experience and research aptly demonstrate, there is a valuable contribution to be made toward learning and curiosity through the use of graphic materials. While uses across different subjects vary to different degrees, the professional discretion of teachers has always utilized a pragmatic approach, based on the subject and content of the title, but also their own teaching style. In spite of history of being subjected to the academic hegemony of the day, these materials continue to show their worth in curiosity and enthusiasm across a wide spectrum of readers. While schools focus on different bodies of educational standards, it should not be forgotten that

much of what students learn and fondly remember is rooted in a particular aesthetic experience and the imaginative connection they have with it.

Published by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2022

References

Adkinson, C. D. (2008). The Amazing Spider-Man and the evolution of the Comics Code: A case Study in cultural criminology. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 15* (3), 241- 261.

Andrews, T., and Burke, F. (January, 2007) "What Does it Mean to Think Historically?" *Perspectives on History,* 45 (1). https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007-x42638 Accessed: January 21, 2022.

Apple, M., & Christian-Smith, L. (Eds.). (2017). *The politics of the textbook*. Routledge.

Backderf, D. (2020) *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Barbre, J.O. (2018). The practical implications and possibilities for graphic novels and comic books as a component of the literacy experience: A proposal. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. DOI:10.26803/IJLTER.17.11.4

Barbre, J. & Tolbert, J. (Spring/Summer 2021) Graphic instructional pedagogy: Critical literacy development using low art. *Journal of Thought*, 37-56. ProQuest ID 2549948939.

Bell, W. (2002) The Clash of Civilization and Universal Human Values. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 6 (3), pg. 1 – 20.

Behnke, Y. (2016). How textbook design may influence learning with geography textbooks. *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education, 1*, 38-62.

Berkowitz, J., & Packer, T. (2001). Heroes in the classroom: Comic books in art education. *Art Education, 54*(6), 12-18.

Bernadowski, C., Kolencik, P. L., & Del Greco, R. (2013). *Beyond the Textbook: Using Trade Books and Databases to Teach Our Nation's History, Grades 7–12*. Libraries Unlimited.

Bucher, K. T., & Manning, M. L. (2004). Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum. *The Clearing House*, *78*(2), 67–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30197687

Buhle, P. (2007). History and comics. *Reviews in American History, 35*(2), 315-323.

Brouwers, J. Democracy: A Review of a Graphic Novel. *AncientWorldMagazine.com*. https://www.ancientworldmagazine.com/articles/democracy-2015/ Accessed November 15, 2021

Brouwers, J. Three: An Antidote to Frank Miller's *300.* AncientWorldMagazine.com. https://www.ancientworldmagazine.com/articles/three-2014/ Accessed November 15, 2021

Burkholder, P. and Schaffer D. (2021) *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey*. (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2021),

Carter, J. B. (2007). Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving toward Our "Optimus Prime." *The English Journal*, *97*(2), 49–53. https://doi.org/10.2307/30046788

Casselberry, I. '300' Gerard Butler Visits MSU Spartans *Detroit.SBnation.com*. https://detroit.sbnation.com/michigan-st-spartans/2010/10/15/1754772/300-star-gerard-butler-visits-msu-spartans (Accessed January 3, 2022)

Chute, H. (2008). Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative. *PMLA*, *123*(2), 452–465. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501865

Common Core State Standards Initative: English Language Arts Standards. http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/. Accessed February 5, 2022.

De Angelis, R. (Spring, 2005) Of Mice and Vermin: Animals as Absent Referent in Art Spiegelman's Maus, *International Journal of Comic Art, 7 (1), pp. 230-232.*

Derrida, J. (1992). *The other heading: Reflections on today's Europe*. Indiana University Press.

Downey, E. M. (2009). Graphic Novels in Curriculum and Instruction Collections. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *49*(2), 181–188. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20865219

Doxiadis, A., & Papadimitriou, C. (2015). *LOGICOMIX: an epic search for truth*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Eisner, W. (2008). *Comics and sequential art: Principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. WW Norton & Company.

Finke, N. (2007) '300' Smashes March Opening Records; Spartans Stampede to $70 Mil Weekend; 3rd Biggest R-Rated Movie Debut Ever," Dealine.com, March 10, 2007. https://deadline.com/2007/03/r-rated-300-makes-huge-numbers-25-mil-friday-for-expected-60-mil-wkd-1565/ Accessed 1 /25/2022

Finley, W. (2015). Graphic novels in community and junior college libraries. *Community & Junior College Libraries*, *21*(3-4), 75-79.

Freeman, M. (July-December, 2006) Terrorism and Civil Liberties in the United States: How to Have Both Freedom and Security *Democracy and Security*. 2 (2), pg. 231 – 262.

Gaddis, J. (2002) *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gallo, D., & Weiner, S. (2004). Bold Books for Innovative Teaching: Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom. *The English Journal*, *94*(2), 114–117. https://doi.org/10.2307/4128785

Gillen, K., Kelley, R., Bellair, J. (2014) *Three*. Portland, OR: Image Comics.

Gluibizzi, A. (2007). The Aesthetics and Academics of Graphic Novels and Comics. *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, *26*(1), 28–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27949450

Gorlewski, J., & Schmidt, J. (2011). Research for the Classroom: Graphic Novels in the Classroom: Curriculum Design, Implementation, and Reflection. *The English Journal*, *100*(5), 104–107. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23047812

Hajdu, D. (2009). *The ten-cent plague: The great comic-book scare and how it changed America.* Macmillan.

Hansen, K. S. (2012). In defense of graphic novels. *English Journal*, *102*(2), 57-63.

Harrari, Y., Vandermeulen, D., Casanave, D. (2020) *Sapiens: A graphic history* volume 1. New York: Harper Perennial.

Hatem, M. (Fall 2003/Spring 2004) Discourses on the War on Terrorism in the U.S. and its Views of the Arab, Muslim, and Gendered 'Other, *The Arab Studies Journal*, 11/12 (2/1), 77-97

Hennessey, J. and McConnell, A. (2013) The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008)

Hinds, G. (2010). *The odyssey*. Gareth Hinds.

Jacobs, D. (2007). More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies. *The English Journal*, *96*(3), 19–25. https://doi.org/10.2307/30047289

Jones, W. (2017) *Classics Illustrated: A cultural history (2nd ed.).* North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Keller-Schneider, M. (2018). Job demands appraisals, classroom climate, and team support predict changes in emotional exhaustion among teachers after two years: A sequential mediation model. *Journal of Teacher Education and Educators, 7*(3), 223-242

Lapp, D., Wolsey, T. D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2011). Graphic Novels: What Elementary Teachers Think About Their Instructional Value. *The Journal of Education*, *192*(1), 23–35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42744005

Lee, H., & Fordham, F. (2018). *To Kill a Mockingbird: A Graphic Novel*. HarperCollins.

Letcher, M. (2008). Off the Shelves: Graphically Speaking: Graphic Novels with Appeal for Teens and Teachers. *The English Journal*, *98*(1), 93–97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40503218

Lewis, J., Aydin, A., and Powell, N. (2019) *March*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.

McCloud, S. (2006) *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*. New York: William Morrow.

Meyer, C. (2012). Urban America in the newspaper comic strips of the nineteenth century: Introducing the Yellow Kid. *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, *6*(2).

Meyer, C. K., & Jiménez, L. M. (2017). Using Every Word and Image: Framing Graphic Novel Instruction in the Expanded Four Resources Model. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *61*(2), 153–161. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26631094

Miller, F., Varley, L. (1998) *300.* Milwaukee, Dark Horse Comics.

Moeller, R. A. (2016). A Question of Legitimacy: GRAPHIC NOVEL READING AS "REAL" READING. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *59*(6), 709–717. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44011333

Nesmith, S., Cooper, S., & Schwarz, G. (2011). Exploring Graphic Novels for Elementary Science and Mathematics. *School Library Media Research*, *14*.

Nesmith, S., Cooper, S., Schwarz, G., & Walker, A. (2017). Are graphic novels always "cool"? Parent and student perspectives on elementary mathematics and science graphic novels: The need for action research by school leaders. *Planning and Changing*, *47*(3/4), 228.

Nyberg, A. K. (1994). *Seal of approval: The origins and history of the comics code* (Order No. 9419373). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ CIC Institutions; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304111880). Retrieved from https://proxyeast.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/seal-approval-origins-history-comics-code/docview/304111880/se-2?accountid=11648

O'Connor, G. and van den Bogaert, H. (2006) *Journey into Mohawk Country*. New York: Macmillan Publishers.

Orlando, J., Feldstein, A. B., Oleck, J., Bradbury, R., & Binder, O. O. (2014). *Judgment day and other stories*. Seattle: Fantagraphic Books.

Pagliaro, M. (2014). Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Determining the Criteria for Graphic Novels with Literary Merit. *The English Journal*, *103*(4), 31–45. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484218

Papadatos, A., Kawa, A., Di Donna, A. (2015) Democracy. New York: Bloomsbury.

Park, J. Y. (2016). "He Didn't Add More Evidence": Using Historical Graphic Novels to Develop Language Learners' Disciplinary Literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *60*(1), 35–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44011346

Park, H. S. (2011). Art Spiegelman's Maus: A survivor's tale: A bibliographic essay. *Shofar, 29*(2), 146-VIII. Retrieved from https://proxyeast.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/art-spiegelmans-maus-survivors-tale-bibliographic/docview/852618824/se-2?accountid=11648

Perret, M. (2004). Not just condensation: How comic books interpret Shakespeare. *College Literature, 3*1(4), 72-93

Richardson, E. M. (2017). " Graphic Novels Are Real Books": Comparing Graphic Novels to Traditional Text Novels. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *83*(5).

Rhoades, S. (2008). *A complete history of American comic books*. Peter Lang.

Rothberg, M. (Winter, 1994) 'We Were Talking Jewish': Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as "Holocaust" Production," *Contemporary Literature*, 35 (4).

Said, E. (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

Satrapi, M. (2007) *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.

Schumm, J. S., Vaughn, S., & Saumell, L. (1992). What teachers do when the textbook is tough: Students speak out. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 2*4(4), 481-503.

Snyder, Z. (2007) *300*. Legendary Pictures and Warner Bros. Pictures.

Spiegelman, A. (1996) *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon.

Stein, D., Meyer, C., & Edlich, M. (2011). Introduction: American Comic Books and Graphic Novels. *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, *56*(4), 501–529. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23509427

Stout, D. (February 24, 2004) "Bush Backs Ban in Constitution on Gay Marriage,", *New York Times.com*. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/24/politics/bush-backs-ban-in-constitution-on-gay-marriage.html Accessed: January 17, 2022

Takei, G., and Eisinger, J. (2019) *They Called Us Enemy*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.

United States Congress Senate *Committee on the Judiciary: Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency* (interim report of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency; 1955).

Wertham, F. (1954). *Seduction of the innocent.* New York: Rinehart.

Williams, R. M.-C. (2008). Image, Text, and Story: Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom. *Art Education*, *61*(6), 13–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/27696303.

Wineburg, S. (2001) *Historical Thinking and Other Natural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Wright, B. W. (2003). *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*. JHU Press.

Yang, G. (2006) *American Born Chinese.* Square Fish.

Sequential Art Narrative in Education, vol. 2 no. 7